

# interzone/83

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SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

May  
1994

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**Greg Egan**  
**Eric Brown**  
**Sarah Ash**  
and others

Plus the return of  
**Charles Platt**  
(and Bruce Sterling)



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**Subscriptions:** £28 for one year (12 issues) in the UK. Cheques or postal orders should be crossed and made payable to Interzone. Overseas subscriptions are £34, payable by International Money Order. Payments may also be made by Access or Visa card (also MasterCard or Eurocard): please send your cardholder's name, initials and address written in block letters, with card number, card expiry date and signature. (Note: overseas payments will be charged at the £ sterling rate.) Alternatively, U.S. subscribers may pay by dollar check — \$52 by Air Saver (accelerated surface mail). Lifetime subscriptions: £280 (UK); £340 (overseas); \$520 (U.S. accelerated surface).

**Back-issues** of Interzone are available at £2.50 each in the UK (£2.80 each overseas), postage included. (US dollar price: \$5 surface mail.) All issues are still in print except Interzone numbers 1, 5, 6, 7, 16, 17, 20, 21, 22 and 23. Order them from the address above.

**Submissions:** stories, in the 2,000-6,000 word range, should be sent singly and each one must be accompanied by a stamped self-addressed envelope of adequate size. Persons overseas please send a disposable manuscript (marked as such) and two International Reply Coupons. We are unable to reply to writers who do not send return postage. No responsibility can be accepted for loss or damage to unsolicited material, howsoever caused. Submissions should be sent to the main Brighton address, above.

# interzone

## SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

No 83

May 1994

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**Cover by Danny Flynn** from his book *Only Visiting the Planet*, to be published in June 1994 by Dragon's World Ltd.

Published monthly.

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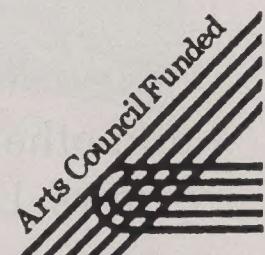
**ISSN 0264-3596**

Printed by KP Litho Ltd, Brighton

Trade distribution through Diamond Magazine Distribution Ltd., Unit 1, Burgess Rd., Ivyhouse Lane, Hastings, E. Sussex TN35 4NR (tel. 0424 430422)

Bookshop distribution through Central Books, 99 Wallis Rd., London E9 5LN (tel. 081 896 4854)

U.S. and Canadian distribution through Worldwide Magazine Distributors Ltd., Unit 14 – 225 Bysham Park Drive, Woodstock, Ontario N4T 1P1, Canada (tel. 519 539 0200) – both trade and individual queries welcomed.



# Interface

Yes, Charles Platt is back! He used to write a regular column for *Interzone* which was appreciated by many of our readers, but he ceased doing so due to a combination of ill health and other factors. Well, now he's with us again, fighting fit and ready to take on the world in a spate of regular missives to these pages from fabled New York. (For those of you who don't know anything about the man's bio-bibliography, he is British but moved to the USA over 20 years ago; his sf novels include *Less Than Human*, 1986, *Free Zone*, 1988, and *The Silicon Man*, 1991; his non-fiction writings include two volumes of *Dream Makers: The Uncommon People Who Write Science Fiction*, 1980 and 1983, as well as a computer handbook and a cat book.)

We're very pleased to welcome Charles back; and, by coincidence, we're also pleased to have the chance to say "hello" once more to another former columnist (and fiction contributor), **Bruce Sterling**. The latter returns to these pages by way of an interview, but, who knows, perhaps we'll see more substantial matter from him in the future. Nice to hear you again, Bruce.

## Arthur C. Clarke Award

There should be a reminder on the opposite page of the sf titles which have been shortlisted for this year's Clarke Award. The winner will be announced, and the award itself will be presented, by Britain's one-and-only astronaut, Helen Sharman OBE,

at 7.30 pm on **Wednesday 20th April 1994**. The venue is the Kennedy Room, the Irish Centre, Murray Street, Camden Town, London (a few minutes' walk north of Camden tube station) and the doors are open and drinks available from 6pm. A buffet will follow the award announcement at 7.30. As well as the short-listed writers (or their representatives) and sundry publishers and persons of the press, any readers who wish to attend are welcome to do so. Perhaps see you there?

## Wrongly Addressed Manuscripts

This probably doesn't apply to the majority of our readers because, after all, you do read the magazine. We'd be grateful, though, if you could pass the following words on to any aspiring writers you happen to know who choose not to read *Interzone* regularly but who nevertheless still feel the need to bombard us with story manuscripts...

We left our old (Osborne Road) address three years ago, in May 1991, and moved to **217 Preston Drove, Brighton BN1 6FL**. For two years we had a Post Office forwarding arrangement to ensure that any mail sent to our old address was delivered to our new one. That arrangement expired in May 1993. For the past year, I have been strolling round to the old abode every couple of months or so to pick up errant mail. I would have thought the stream of wrongly addressed post would have

died away to the merest trickle by now, but it hasn't – every time, without fail, there are still dozens of manuscripts mixed in with the junk mail, the two-month-old Christmas cards and whatnot. The sheer volume of post is beginning to become a serious irritant to the people who now occupy that address.

Well, three years is long enough. From now on, any wrongly addressed MSS will be returned unread (though said return may be subject to a couple of months' delay). Please also note that we removed **Lee Montgomerie's** address (in Leeds) from page three of this magazine quite some time ago; she's still there, but due to pressure of work she no longer wishes to receive manuscripts directly (and at her address too the stream of post shows no sign of drying up). Henceforth, please, send all manuscripts to 217 Preston Drove, Brighton, and to that address only.

No space for Readers' Letters this issue, but we shall certainly run some next time, so don't be deterred from writing to us about the contents of the magazine – or anything else to do with sf that's on your mind. (Particular thanks to those who have continued to write to me on the subject of sf movie novelizations.)

We should have brought you the results of the 1993 Readers' Poll in this issue, but I'm afraid there's been a delay in counting them – next time, I hope.

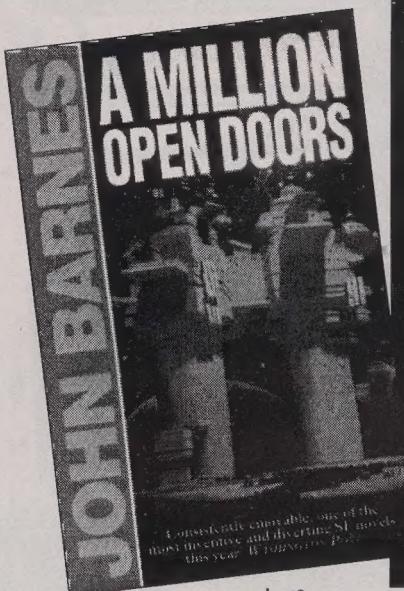
(David Pringle)

## COMING NEXT MONTH IN INTERZONE

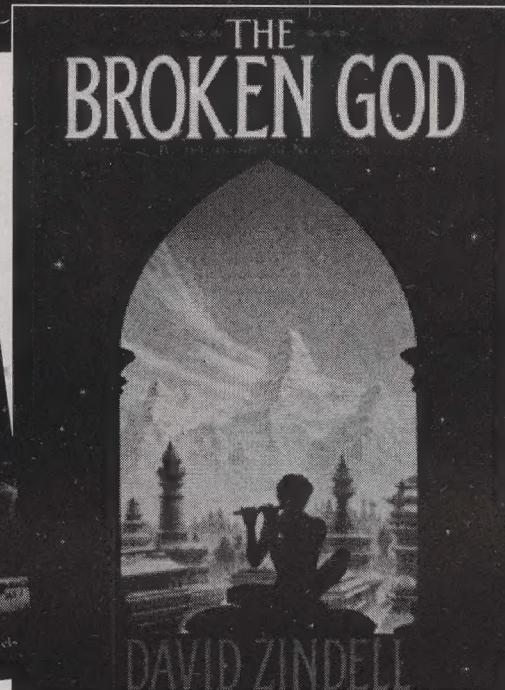
New stories by Robert Holdstock, Brian Stableford and others, plus all our usual interviews, features and reviews. Look out for the June *Interzone*, on sale in May.

THE  
*Arthur C Clarke*  
AWARD

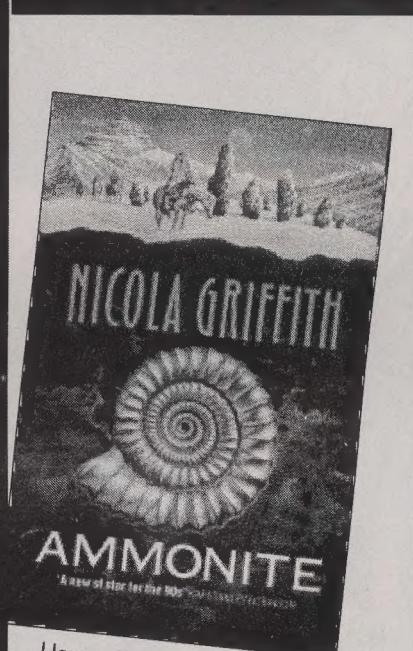
# Shortlist for the best SF novel published in the UK



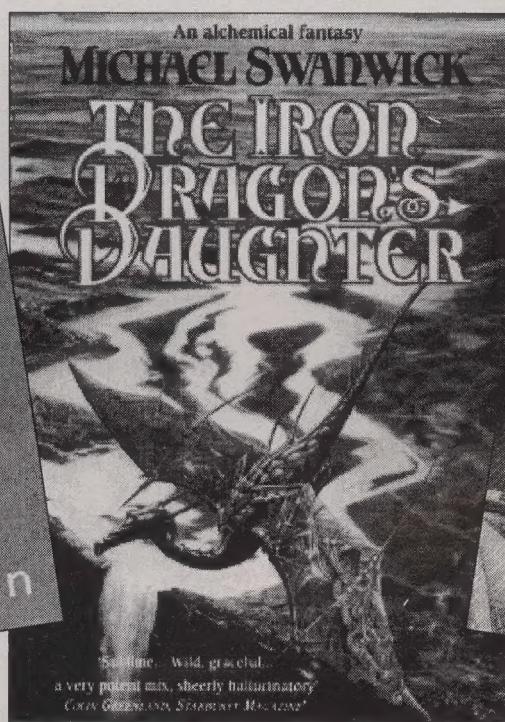
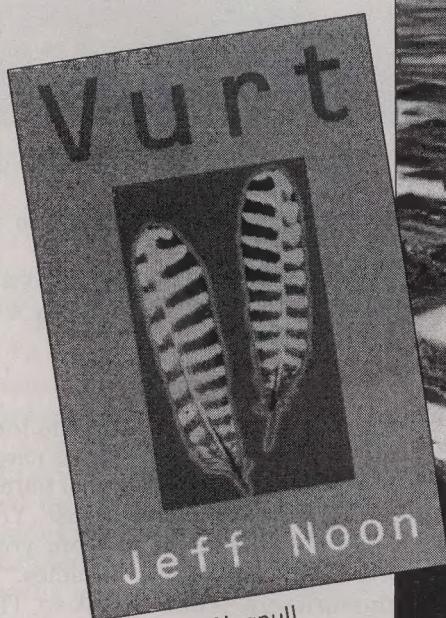
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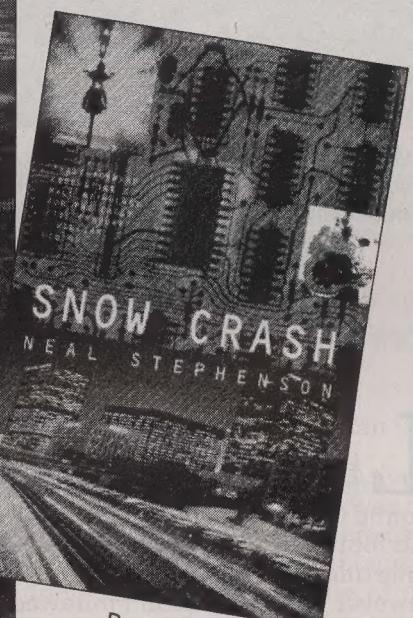
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HarperCollins Publishers



Millennium



Penguin

The winner will be announced on April 20th



# GREG

We knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth, for surely there is no such splendour or beauty anywhere upon earth.

— The envoy of Prince Vladimir of Kiev,  
describing the Church of the Divine Wisdom in  
Constantinople, 987.

It is the rustiest old barn in heathendom.

— S.L. Clemens, ditto, 1867.

**L**uciano Masini had the haunted demeanour and puffy complexion of an insomniac. I'd picked him as a man who'd begun to ask himself, around two a.m. nightly, if his 20-year-old wife really had found the lover of her dreams in an industrialist three times her age — however witty, however erudite, however wealthy. I hadn't followed his career in any detail, but his most famous move had been to buy the entire superconducting cables division of Pirelli, when the parent company was dismembered in '09. He was impeccably dressed in a grey silk suit, the cut precisely old-fashioned enough to be stylish, and he looked as if he'd once been strikingly handsome. A

perfect candidate, I decided, for vain self-delusion and belated second thoughts.

I was wrong. What he said was: "I want you to locate a package for me."

"A package?" I did my best to sound fascinated — although if adultery was stultifying, lost property was worse. "Missing en route from — ?"

"Zürich."

"To Milan?"

"Of course!" Masini almost flinched, as if the idea that he might have been shipping his precious cargo elsewhere, intentionally, caused him physical pain.

I said carefully, "Nothing is ever really lost. You might find that a strongly-worded letter from your lawyers to the courier is enough to work miracles."

Masini smiled humourlessly. "I don't think so. The courier is dead."

Afternoon light filled the room; the window faced east, away from the sun, but the sky itself was dazzling. I suffered a moment of strange clarity, a compelling sense of having just shaken off a lingering drowsiness, as if I'd begun the conversation half asleep and

# CHERNOBYL



## EGAN

only now fully woken. Masini let the copper orrery on the wall behind me beat twice, each tick a soft, complicated meshing of a thousand tiny gears. Then he said, "She was found in a hotel room in Vienna, three days ago. She'd been shot in the head at close range. And no, she was not meant to take any such detour."

"What was in the package?"

"A small icon." He indicated a height of some 30 centimetres. "An 18th-century depiction of the Madonna. Originally from the Ukraine."

"Ukraine? Do you know how it came to be in Zürich?" I'd heard that the Ukrainian government had recently launched a renewed campaign to persuade certain countries to get serious about the return of stolen artwork. Crateloads had been smuggled out during the turmoil and corruption of the 1980s and 1990s.

"It was part of the estate of a well-known collector, a man with an impeccable reputation. My own art dealer examined all the paperwork, the bills of sale, the export licenses, before giving his blessing to the deal."

"Paperwork can be forged."

Masini struggled visibly to control his impatience. "Anything can be forged. What do you want me to say? I have no reason to suspect that this was stolen property. I'm not a criminal, Signor Fabrizio."

"I'm not suggesting that you are. So...money and goods changed hands in Zürich? The icon was yours when it was stolen?"

"Yes."

"May I ask how much you paid for it?"

"Five million Swiss francs."

I let that pass without comment, although for a moment I wondered if I'd heard correctly. I was no expert, but I did know that Orthodox icons were usually painted by anonymous artists, and were intended to be as far from unique as individual copies of the Bible. There were exceptions, of course – a few treasured, definitive examples of each type – but they were a great deal older than 18th-century. However fine the craftsmanship, however well-preserved, five million sounded far too high.

I said, "Surely you insured – ?"

"Of course! And in a year or two, I may even get my money back. But I'd much prefer to have the icon. That's why I purchased it in the first place."

"And your insurers will agree. They'll be doing their best to find it." If another investigator had a head start on me, I didn't want to waste my time – least of all if I'd be competing against a Swiss insurance firm on their home ground.

Masini fixed his bloodshot eyes on me. "Their best is not good enough! Yes, they'll want to save themselves the money, and they'll treat this potential loss with great seriousness...like the accountants they are. And the Austrian police will try very hard to find the murderer, no doubt. Neither are moved by any sense of urgency. Neither would be greatly troubled if nothing were resolved for months. Or years."

If I'd been wrong about Masini's nocturnal visions of adultery, I'd been right about one thing: there was a passion, an obsession, driving him which ran as deep as jealousy, as deep as pride, as deep as sex. He leant forward across the desk, restraining himself from seizing my shirtfront, but commanding and imploring me with as much arrogance and pathos as if he had.

"Two weeks! I'll give you two weeks – and you can name your fee! Deliver the icon to me within a fortnight...and everything I have is yours for the asking!"

I treated Masini's extravagant offer with as much seriousness as it deserved, but I accepted the case. There were worse ways to spend a fortnight, I decided, than consulting with informants on the fringes of the black market over long lunches in restaurants fit for connoisseurs of fine art.

The obvious starting point, though, was the courier. Her name was Gianna De Angelis: 27 years old, five years in the business, with a spotless reputation; according to the regulatory authorities, not a single complaint had ever been lodged against her, by customer or employer. She'd been working for a small Milanese firm with an equally good record: this was their first loss, in 20 years, of either merchandise or personnel.

I spoke to two of her colleagues; they gave me the barest facts, but wouldn't be drawn into speculation. The transaction had taken place in a Zürich bank vault, then De Angelis had taken a taxi straight to the airport. She'd phoned head office to say that all was well, less than five minutes before she was due to board the flight home. The plane had left on time, but she hadn't been on it. She'd bought a ticket from Tyrolean Airlines – using her own credit card – and flown straight to Vienna, carrying the attaché case containing the icon as hand luggage. Six hours later, she was dead.

I tracked down her fiancé, a TV sound technician, to the apartment they'd shared. He was red-eyed, unshaven, hung-over. Still in shock, or I doubt he would have let me through the door. I offered my condolences, helped him finish a bottle of wine, then gently inquired whether Gianna had received any unusual phone calls, made plans to spend extravagant sums of money, or had appeared uncharacteristically nervous or excited in recent weeks. I had to cut the interview short when he began trying to crack my skull open with the empty bottle.

I returned to the office and began trawling the databases, from the official public records right down to the patchwork collections of mailing lists and crudely collated electronic debris purveyed by assorted cyberpimps. One system, operating out of Tokyo, could search the world's digitized newspapers, and key frames from TV news reports, looking for a matching face – whether or not the subject's name was mentioned in the caption or commentary. I found a near-twin walking arm-in-arm with a gangster outside a Buenos Aires courthouse in 2007, and another weeping in the wreckage of a village in the Philippines, her family killed in a typhoon, in 2010, but there were no genuine sightings. A text-based search of local media yielded exactly two entries; she'd only made it into the papers at birth and at death.

So far as I could discover, her financial position had been perfectly sound. No one had any kind of dirt on her, and there wasn't the faintest whiff of an association with organized crime. The icon would have been far from the most valuable item she'd ever laid her hands on – and I still thought Masini had paid a vastly inflated price for it. Artwork – anonymous or not – wasn't exactly the most liquid of assets. So why had she sold out, on this particular job, when there must have been a hundred opportunities which had been far more tempting?

Maybe she hadn't been trying to sell the icon in Vienna. Maybe she'd been coerced into going there. I couldn't imagine anyone "kidnapping" her in the middle of the airport, marching her over to the ticket office, through the security scanners and onto the plane. She'd been armed, highly trained, and carrying all the electronics she could possibly need to summon immediate assistance. But even if she hadn't had an X-ray-transparent gun pointed at her heart every step of the way, maybe a more subtle threat had compelled her.

As dusk fell on the first day of my allotted 14, I paced the office irritably, already feeling pessimistic. De Angelis's image smiled coolly on the terminal; her grieving lover's wine tasted sour in my throat. This woman was dead, that was the crime...and I was being paid to hunt for a faded piece of kitsch. If I found the killers it would be incidental. And the truth was, I was hoping I wouldn't.

I opened the blinds and looked down towards the city centre. Flea-sized specks scurried across the Piazza del Duomo, the cathedral's forest of mad Gothic pinnacles towering above them. I rarely noticed the cathedral; it was just another part of the expensive view (like the Alps, visible from the reception room)...and the view was just part of the whole high-class image which enabled me to charge 20 times as much for my services as any back-alley operator. Now I blinked at the sight of it as if it were an hallucination, it seemed so alien, so out of place beside the gleaming dark ceramic buildings of 21st-century Milan. Statues of saints, or angels, or gargoyles – I couldn't remember, and at this distance, I couldn't really tell them apart – stood atop every pinnacle, like a thousand demented stylites. The whole roof was encrusted with pink-tinged marble, dizzyingly, surreally ornate, looking in places like lace-work, and in places like barbed wire. Good atheist or not, I'd been inside once or twice, though I struggled

to remember when and why; some unavoidable ceremonial occasion. In any case, I'd grown up with the sight of it; it should have been a familiar landmark, nothing more. But at that moment, the whole structure seemed utterly foreign, utterly strange; it was as if the mountains to the north had shed their snow and greenery and topsoil and revealed themselves to be giant artefacts, pyramids from Central America, relics of a vanished civilization.

I closed the blinds, and wiped the dead courier's face from my computer screen.

Then I bought myself a ticket to Zürich.

**T**he databases had had plenty to say about Rolf Hengartner. He'd worked in electronic publishing, making deals on some ethereal plane where Europe's biggest software providers carved up the market to their mutual satisfaction. I imagined him skiing, snow and water, with Ministers of Culture and satellite magnates... although probably not in the last few years, in his 70s, with acute lymphoma. He'd started out in film finance, orchestrating the funding of multinational co-productions; one of the photographs of him in the reception room to what was now his assistant's office showed him raising a clenched fist beside a still-young Depardieu at an anti-Hollywood demonstration in Paris 20 years before.

Max Reif, his assistant, had been appointed executor of the estate. I'd downloaded the latest overpriced Schweizerdeutsch software for my notepad, in the hope that it would guide me through the interview without too many blunders, but Reif insisted on speaking Italian, and turned out to be perfectly fluent.

Hengartner's wife had died before him, but he was survived by three children and ten grandchildren. Reif had been instructed to sell all of the art, since none of the family had ever shown much interest in the collection.

"What was his passion? Orthodox icons?"

"Not at all. Herr Hengartner was eclectic, but the icon was a complete surprise to me. Something of an anomaly. He owned some French Gothic and Italian Renaissance works with religious themes, but he certainly didn't specialize in the Madonna, let alone the Eastern tradition."

Reif showed me a photograph of the icon in the glossy brochure which had been put together for the auction; Masini had mislaid his copy of the catalogue, so this was my first chance to see exactly what I was searching for. I read the Italian section in the pentalingual commentary on the facing page:

A stunning example of the icon known as the Vladimir Mother of God, probably the most ancient variation of the icons of "loving-kindness" (Greek eleousa, Russian umileniye). It depicts the Virgin holding the Child, His face pressed tenderly to His Mother's cheek, in a powerful symbol of both divine and human compassion for all of creation. According to tradition, this icon derives from a painting by the Evangelist Luke. The surviving exemplar, from which the type takes its name, was brought to Kiev from Constantinople in the 12th century, and is now in the Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. It has been described as the greatest holy treasure of the Russian nation.

Artist unknown. Ukrainian, early 18th century.

Cypress panel, 293 x 204 mm, egg tempera on linen, exquisitely decorated with beaten silver.

The reserve price was listed as 80 thousand Swiss francs. Less than a fiftieth what Masini had paid for it.

The aesthetic attraction of the piece was lost on me; it wasn't exactly a Caravaggio. The colours were drab, the execution was crude – deliberately two-dimensional – and even the silver was badly tarnished. The paintwork itself appeared to be in reasonable condition; for a moment I thought there was a hairline crack across the full width of the icon, but on closer inspection it looked more like a flaw in the reproduction: a scratch on the printing plate, or some photographic intermediate.

Of course, this wasn't meant to be "high art" in the Western tradition. No expression of the artist's ego, no indulgent idiosyncrasies of style. It was – presumably – a faithful copy of the Byzantine original, intended to play a specific role in the practice of the Orthodox religion, and I was in no position to judge its value in that context. But I had trouble imagining either Rolf Hengartner or Luciano Masini as secret converts to the Eastern church. So was it purely a matter of a good investment? Was this nothing but an 18th-century baseball card, to them? If Masini's only interest was financial, though, why had he paid so much more than the market value? And why was he so desperate to get it back?

I said, "Can you tell me who bid for the icon, besides Signor Masini?"

"The usual dealers, the usual brokers. I'm afraid I couldn't tell you on whose behalf they were acting."

"But you did monitor the bidding?" A number of potential buyers, or their agents, had visited Zürich to view the collection in person – Masini among them – but the auction itself had taken place by phone line and computer.

"Of course."

"Was there a consensus for a price close to Masini's final bid? Or was he forced up to it by just one of those anonymous rivals?"

Reif stiffened, and I suddenly realized what that must have sounded like. I said, "I certainly didn't mean to imply –"

"At least three other bidders," he said icily, "were within a few hundred thousand francs of Signor Masini all the way. I'm sure he'll confirm that, if you take the trouble to ask him." He hesitated, then added less defensively, "Obviously the reserve price was set far too low. But Herr Hengartner anticipated that the auction house would undervalue this item."

That threw me. "I thought you didn't know about the icon until after his death. If you'd discussed its value with him –"

"I didn't. But Herr Hengartner left a note beside it in the safe."

He hesitated, as if debating with himself whether or not I deserved to be privy to the great man's insights. I didn't dare plead with him, let alone insist; I just waited in silence for him to continue. It can't have been more than ten or 15 seconds, but I swear I broke out in a sweat.

Reif smiled, and put me out of my misery. "The note said: Prepare to be surprised."

In the early evening I left my hotel room and wandered through the city centre. I'd never had reason to visit Zürich before, but – language aside – it was already beginning to feel just like home. The same fast food chains had colonized the city. The electronic billboards displayed the same advertisements. The glass fronts of the VR parlours glowed with surreal images from the very same games, and the 12-year-olds inside had all succumbed to the same unfortunate Texan fashions. Even the smell of the place was exactly like Milan on a Saturday night: french fries, popcorn, Reeboks and Coke.

Had Ukrainian secret service agents killed De Angelis to get the icon back? Was this the flip-side of all the diplomatic efforts to recover stolen artwork? That seemed unlikely. If there were the slightest grounds for the return of the icon, then dragging the matter through the courts would have meant far better publicity for the cause. Slaughtering foreign citizens could play havoc with international aid... and the Ukraine was in the middle of negotiating an upgrading of its trade relationship with Europe. I couldn't believe that any government would risk so much for a single work of art, in a country full of more-or-less interchangeable copies of the very same piece. It wasn't as if Hengartner had got his hands on the 12th-century original.

Who, then? Another collector, another obsessive hoarder, whom Masini had outbid? Someone, perhaps, unlike Hengartner, who already owned several other baseball cards, and wanted a complete set? Maybe Masini's insurance firm had the connections and clout needed to find out who the true bidders at the auction had been; I certainly didn't. A rival collector wasn't the only possibility; one of the bidders could have been a dealer who was so impressed by the price the icon fetched that he or she decided it was worth acquiring by other means.

The air was growing cold faster than I'd expected; I decided to return to the hotel. I'd been walking along the west bank of the Limmat River, down towards the lake; I started to cross back over at the first bridge I came to, then I paused midway to get my bearings. There were cathedrals either side of me, facing each other across the river; unimposing structures compared to Milan's giant Nosferatu Castle, but I felt a – ridiculous – frisson of unease, as if the pair of them had conspired to ambush me.

My Schweizerdeutsch package came with free maps and tour guides; I hit the WHERE AM I? button, and the GPS unit in the notepad passed its coordinates to the software, which proceeded to demystify my surroundings. The two buildings in question were the Grossmunster (which looked like a fortress, with two brutal towers side by side, not quite facing the river's east bank) and the Fraumunster (once an abbey, with a single slender spire). Both dated from the 13th century, although modifications of one kind or another had continued almost to the present. Stained-glass windows by, respectively, Giacometti and Chagall. And Ulrich Zwingli had launched the Swiss Reformation from the pulpit of the Grossmünster in 1523.

I was staring at one of the birthplaces of a sect which had endured for 500 years – and it was far stranger than standing in the shadow of the most

ancient Roman temple. To say: Christianity has shaped the physical and cultural landscape of Europe for 2,000 years, as relentlessly as any glacier, as mercilessly as any clash of tectonic plates, is to state the fatuously obvious. But if I'd spent my whole life surrounded by the evidence, it was only now – now that the legacy of those millennia was beginning to seem increasingly bizarre to me – that I had any real sense of what it meant. Arcane theological disputes between people as alien to me as the ancient Egyptians had transformed the entire continent – along with a thousand purely political and economic forces, for sure – but nevertheless, modulating the development of almost every human activity, from architecture to music, from commerce to warfare, at one level or another.

And there was no reason to believe that the process had halted. Just because the Alps were no longer rising didn't mean geology had come to an end.

"Do you wish to know more?" the tour guide asked me.

"Not unless you can tell me the word for a pathological fear of cathedrals."

It hesitated, then replied with impeccable fuzzy logic, "There are cathedrals across the length and breadth of Europe. Which particular cathedrals did you have in mind?"

De Angelis's colleagues had provided me with the name of the taxi company she'd used for her trip from the bank to the airport – the last thing she'd paid for with her business credit card. I'd spoken to the manager of the company by phone from Milan, and there was a message from her when I arrived back at the hotel, with the name of the driver for the journey in question. Far from the last person who'd seen De Angelis alive – but possibly the last before she'd been persuaded, by whatever means, to take the icon to Vienna. He was due to report for work at the depot that evening at nine. I ate quickly, then set out into the cold again. The only taxis outside the hotel were from a rival company. I went on foot.

I found Phan Anh Tuan drinking coffee in a corner of the garage. After a brief exchange in German, he asked me if I'd prefer to speak French, and I gratefully switched. He told me he'd been an engineering student in East Berlin when the wall came down. "I always meant to find a way to finish my degree and go home. I got sidetracked, somehow." He gazed out at the dark icy street, bemused.

I put a photo of De Angelis on the table in front of him; he looked long and hard. "No, I'm sorry. I didn't take this woman anywhere."

I hadn't been optimistic; still, it would have been nice to have gleaned some small clue about her state of mind; had she been humming "We're in the Money" all the way to the airport, or what?

I said, "You must have a hundred customers a day. Thanks for trying." I started to take the photo back; he caught my hand.

"I'm not telling you I must have forgotten her. I'm telling you I'm sure I've never seen her before."

I said, "Last Monday. Two-twelve pm. Intercontinental Bank to the airport. The despatcher's records show –"

He was frowning. "Monday? No. I had engine

trouble. I was out of service for almost an hour. Until nearly three."

"Are you sure?"

He fetched a handwritten log book from his vehicle, and showed me the entry.

I said, "Why would the despatcher get it wrong?"

He shrugged. "It must have been a software glitch. A computer takes the calls, allocates them...it's all fully automated. We flick a switch on the radio when we're unavailable – and I can't have forgotten to do that, because I kept the radio on all the time I was working on the car, and no fares came through to me."

"Could someone else have accepted a job from the despatcher, pretending to be you?"

He laughed. "Intentionally? No. Not without changing the ID number of their radio."

"And how hard would that be? Would you need a forged chip, with a duplicate serial number?"

"No. But it would mean pulling the radio out, opening it up, and resetting 32 DIP switches. Why would anyone bother?" Then I saw it click in his eyes.

I said, "Do you know of anyone here having a radio stolen recently? The two-way, not the music?"

He nodded sadly. "Both. Someone had both stolen. About a month ago."

I returned in the morning and confirmed most of what Phan had told me with some of the other drivers. There was no easy way of proving that he hadn't lied about the engine trouble and driven De Angelis himself, but I couldn't see why he would have invented an "alibi" when there was no need for one – when he could have said "Yes, I drove her, she hardly spoke a word" and no one would have had the slightest reason to doubt him.

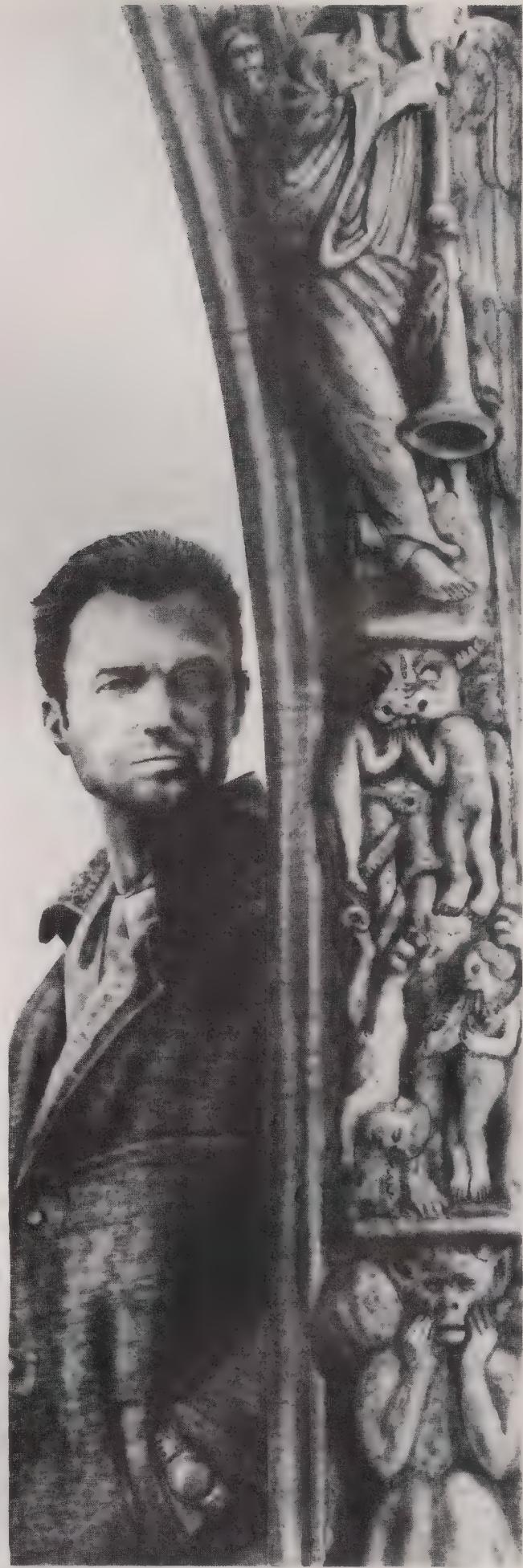
So: someone had gone to a lot of trouble to be alone in a fake taxi with De Angelis...and then they'd let her walk into the airport and phone home. To delay the moment when head office would realize that something had gone wrong, presumably – but why had she gone along with that? What had the driver said to her, in those few minutes, to make her so cooperative? Was it a threat to her family, her lover? Or a bribe, large enough to convince her to make up her mind on the spot? And then she hadn't bothered to cover her trail, because she knew there'd be no way to do so convincingly? She'd accepted the fact that her guilt would be obvious, and that she'd have to become a fugitive?

That sounded like one hell of a bribe. So how could she have been so naive as to think that anyone would actually pay it?

Outside the Intercontinental Bank, I took her photo from my wallet and held it up towards the armoured-glass revolving doors, trying to imagine the scene. The taxi arrives, she climbs in, they pull out into the traffic. The driver says: Nice weather we're having. By the way, I know what you've got in the attaché case. Come to Vienna with me and I'll make you rich.

She stared back at me accusingly. I said, "All right, De Angelis, I'm sorry. I don't believe you were that stupid."

I gazed at the laser-printed image. Something nagged at me. Digital radios with driver IDs? For some reason, that had surprised me. It shouldn't have. Perhaps movie scenes of taxi drivers and police



communicating in incomprehensible squawks still lingered in my subconscious, still shaped my expectations on some level – in spite of the kind of technology I used myself every day. The word “auction” still conjured up scenes of a man or woman with a hammer, shouting out bids in a crowded room – though I’d never witnessed anything remotely like that, except in the movies. In real life, everything was computerized, everything was digital. This “photograph” was digital. Chemical film had started disappearing from the shops when I was 14 or 15 years old – and even in my childhood, it was strictly an amateur medium; most commercial photographers had been using CCD arrays for almost 20 years.

So why did there appear to be a fine scratch across the photograph of the icon? The few hundred copies of the auction catalogue would have been produced without using a single analogue intermediate; everything would have gone from digital camera, to computer, to laser printer. The glossy end-product was the one anachronism – and a less conservative auction house would have offered an on-line version, or an interactive CD.

Reif had let me keep the catalogue; back in my hotel room, I inspected it again. The “scratch” definitely wasn’t a crack in the paintwork; it cut right across the image, a perfectly straight, white line of uniform thickness, crossing from paint to raised silverwork without the slightest deviation.

A glitch in the camera’s electronics? Surely the photographer would have noticed that, and tried again. And even if the flaw had been spotted too late for a retake, one keystroke on any decent image-processing package would have removed it instantly.

I tried to phone Reif; it took almost an hour to get through to him. I said, “Can you tell me the name of the graphic designers who produced the auction catalogue?”

He stared at me as if I’d called him in the middle of sex to ask who’d murdered Elvis. “Why do you need to know that?”

“I just want to ask their photographer – ”

“Their photographer?”

“Yes. Or whoever it was who photographed the items in the collection.”

“It wasn’t necessary to have the collection photographed. Herr Hengartner already had photographs of everything, for insurance purposes. He left a disc with the image files, and detailed instructions for the layout of the catalogue. He knew that he was dying. He had everything organized, everything prepared. Does that answer your question? Does that satisfy your curiosity?”

Not quite. I steeled myself, and grovelled: Could I have a copy of the original image file? I was seeking advice from an art historian in Moscow, and the best colour fax of the catalogue wouldn’t do justice to the icon. Reif begrudgingly had an assistant locate the data and transmit it to me.

The line, the “scratch,” was there in the file. Hengartner – who’d treasured this icon in secret, and who’d somehow known that it would fetch an extraordinary price – had left behind an image of it with a small but unmistakable flaw, and made sure that it was seen by every prospective buyer.

That had to mean something, but I had no idea what.

**A** list of the dates when Lombardy had fallen in and out of Austrian hands, committed to memory when I was 16 years old, just about exhausted my knowledge of the Habsburg empire. Which should hardly have mattered in 2013, but I felt disconcertingly ill-prepared all the same.

In my hotel room, I unpacked my bags, then looked out warily across the rooftops of Vienna. I could see Saint Stephen’s cathedral in the distance; the southern tower, almost detached from the main hall, was topped with a spire like a filigreed radio antenna. The roof of the hall was decorated with richly coloured tiles, forming an eye-catching zig-zag pattern of chevrons and diamonds – as if someone had draped a giant Mongolian rug over the building to keep it warm. But then, anything less exotic would have been a disappointment.

De Angelis had died in the same hotel (in the room directly above me, with much the same view). Booked in under her own name. Paying with her own plastic, when she could have used anonymous cash. Did that prove that she’d had nothing to be ashamed of – that she’d been threatened, not bribed?

I spent half the morning trying to persuade the hotel manager that the local police wouldn’t lock him up for allowing me to speak to his staff about the murder; the whole idea seemed to strike him as akin to treason. “If a Viennese citizen died in Milan,” I argued patiently, “wouldn’t you expect an accredited Austrian investigator to receive every courtesy there?”

“We would send a delegation of police to liaise with the Milanese authorities, not a private detective acting alone.”

I was getting nowhere, so I backed off. Besides, I had an appointment to keep.

My long-awaited expense-account lunch with a black-marketeer turned out to be in a health food restaurant. Back in Milan, I’d paid several million lira to a net-based “introduction agency” to put me in touch with “Anton.” He was much younger than I’d expected; he looked about 20, and he radiated the kind of self-assurance I’d only come across before in wealthy adolescent drug dealers. I managed to avoid using my atrocious German, yet again; Anton spoke CNN English, with an accent that I took to be Hungarian.

I handed him the auction catalogue, open at the relevant page; he glanced at the picture of the icon. “Oh yeah. The Vladimir. I could get you another one, exactly like this. Ten thousand US dollars.”

“I don’t want a forged replica.” Attractive as the idea was, Masini would never have fallen for it. “Or even a similar contemporary piece. I want to know who asked for this. Who spread the word that it was going to change hands in Zürich, and that they’d pay to have it brought east.”

I had to make a conscious effort not to look down to see where he’d placed his feet. Before he’d arrived, I’d discreetly dropped a pinch of silica microspheres onto the floor beneath the table. Each one contained a tiny accelerometer – an array of springy silicon beams a few microns across, fabricated on the same chip as a simple, low-power microprocessor. If just one, out of the 50,000 I’d scattered, still adhered to his shoes the next time we met, I’d be able to interrogate it in infra-

red and learn exactly where he'd been. Or exactly where he kept this pair of shoes when he changed into another.

Anton said, "Icons move west." He made it sound like a law of nature. "Through Prague or Budapest, to Vienna, Salzburg, Munich. That's the way everything's set up."

"For five million Swiss francs, don't you think someone might have made the effort to switch from their traditional lines of supply?"

He scowled. "Five million! I don't believe that. What makes this worth five million?"

"You're the expert. You tell me."

He glared at me as if he suspected that I was mocking him, then looked down at the catalogue again. This time he even read the commentary. He said cautiously, "Maybe it's older than the auctioneers thought. If it's really, say, 15th-century, the price could almost make sense. Maybe your client guessed the true age...and so did someone else." He sighed. "It will be expensive finding out who, though. People will be very reluctant to talk."

I said, "You know where I'm staying. Once you find someone who needs persuading, let me know."

He nodded sullenly, as if he'd seriously hoped I might have handed over a large wad of cash for miscellaneous bribes. I almost asked him about the "scratch" – Could it be some kind of coded message to the cognoscenti that the icon is older than it seems? – but I didn't want to make a fool of myself. He'd seen it, and said nothing; perhaps it was just a meaningless computer glitch after all.

When I'd paid the bill, he stood up to depart, then bent down towards me and said quietly, "If you mention what I'm doing, to anyone, I'll have you killed."

I kept a straight face, and replied, "Vice versa."

When he was gone, I tried to laugh. Stupid, swaggering child. I couldn't quite get the right sound out, though. I didn't imagine he'd be too happy if he found out what he'd trodden in. I took out my notepad, consulted the appointments diary, then let my right arm hang beside me for a second, dousing the floor with a fry-your-brains code to the remaining microspheres.

Then I took the picture of De Angelis from my wallet and held it in front of me on the table.

I said, "Am I in any danger? What do you think?"

She stared back at me, not quite smiling. The expression in her eyes might have been amusement, or it might have been concern. Not indifference; I was sure of that. But she didn't seem prepared to start dispensing predictions or advice.

**J**ust as I was psyching myself up to tackle the hotel manager again, the relevant bureaucrat in the city government finally agreed to fax the hotel a pro-forma statement acknowledging that my licence was recognized throughout the jurisdiction. That seemed to satisfy the manager, though it said no more than the documents I'd already shown him.

The clerk at the check-in desk barely remembered De Angelis; he couldn't say if she'd been cheerful or nervous, friendly or terse. She'd carried her own luggage; a porter remembered seeing her with the attaché case, and an overnight bag. (She'd spent the night in Zürich before collecting the icon.) She hadn't used room service, or any of the hotel restaurants.

The cleaner who'd found the body had been born in Turin, according to his supervisor. I wasn't sure if that was going to be a help or a hindrance. When I tracked him down in a basement storeroom, he said stubbornly, in German, "I told the police everything. Why are you bothering me? Go and ask them, if you want to know the facts."

He turned his back on me. He seemed to be stock-taking carpet shampoo and disinfectant, but he made it look like a matter of urgency.

I said, "It must have been a shock for you. Someone so young. An 80-year-old guest dying in her sleep... you'd probably take it in your stride. But Gianna was 27. A tragedy." He tensed up at the sound of her name; I could see his shoulders tighten. Six days later? A woman he'd never even met?

I said, "You didn't see her any time before, did you? You didn't talk to her?"

"No."

I didn't believe him. The manager was a small-minded cretin; fraternizing was probably strictly forbidden. This guy was in his 20s, good looking, spoke the same language. What had he done? Flirted with her harmlessly in a corridor for 30 seconds? And now he was afraid he'd lose his job if he admitted it?

"No one else will find out, if you tell me what she said. You have my word. It's not like the cops, nothing has to be official. All I want to do is help lock up the fuckers who killed her."

He put down the bar-code scanner and turned to face me. "I just asked her where she was from. What she was doing in town."

Hairs stood up on the back of my neck. It had taken me so long to get even this close to her, I couldn't quite believe it was happening.

"How did she react?"

"She was polite. Friendly. She seemed nervous, though. Distracted."

"And what did she say?"

"She said she was from Milan."

"What else?"

"When I asked her why she was in Vienna, she said she was playing chaperone."

"What?"

"She said she wasn't staying long. And she was only here to play chaperone. To an older lady."

**C**haperone? I lay awake half the night, trying to make sense of that. Did it imply that she hadn't given up custodianship of the icon? That she was still guarding it when she died? That she considered it to be Luciano Masini's property, and still fully intended to deliver it to him, right to the end? -

What had the "taxi driver" said to her? Bring the icon to Vienna for a day? No need to let it out of your sight? We don't want to steal it...we just want to borrow it? To pray to it one last time before it vanishes into another western bank vault? But what was so special about this copy of the Vladimir Mother of God that made it worth so much trouble? The same thing that made it worth five million Swiss francs to Masini, possibly – but what?

And why had De Angelis blown her job, and risked imprisonment, to go along with the scheme? Even if she'd been blind to the obvious fact that it was all a set-up, what could they have offered her in exchange

for flushing her career and reputation down the drain?

I'd only been asleep ten or 20 minutes when I was woken by someone pounding on the door of my room. By the time I'd staggered out of bed and pulled on my trousers, the police had grown impatient and let themselves in with a pass key. It wasn't quite two a.m.

There were four of them, two in uniform. One waved a photograph in front of my face. I squinted at it.

"Did you speak to this man? Yesterday?"

It was Anton. I nodded. If they didn't already know the answer, they wouldn't have asked the question.

"Will you come with us, please?"

"Why?"

"Because your friend is dead."

They showed me the body, so I could confirm that it really was the same man. He'd been shot in the chest and dumped near the canal. Not in it; maybe the killers had been disturbed. In the morgue, the corpse was definitely shoeless, but it would have been worth sending out the microspheres' code, just in case – the things could end up in the strangest places (nostrils, for a start). But before I could think of a plausible excuse to take the notepad from my pocket, they'd pulled the sheet back over his head and led me away for questioning.

The police had found my name and number in "Anton's" notepad (if they knew his real name, they were keeping it to themselves... along with several other things I would have liked to have known, such as whether or not the ballistics matched the bullet used on De Angelis). I recounted the whole conversation in the restaurant, but left out the (illegal) microspheres; they'd find them soon enough, and I had nothing to gain by volunteering a confession.

I was treated with appropriate disdain, but not even verbally abused, really – a five-star rating; I'd had ribs broken in Seveso, and a testicle crushed in Marseille. At half past four, I was free to leave.

Crossing from the interview room to the elevator, I passed half a dozen small offices; they were separated by partitions, but not fully enclosed. On one desk was a cardboard box, full of items of clothing in plastic bags.

I walked past, then stopped just out of sight. There was a man and a woman in the office, neither of whom I'd seen before, talking and making notes.

I walked back and poked my head into the office. I said, "Excuse me... could you tell me... please – ?" I spoke German with the worst accent I could manage; I had a head start, it must have been dire. They stared at me, appalled. Visibly struggling for words, I pulled out my notepad and hit a few keys, fumbling with the phrasebook software, walking deeper into the office. I thought I saw a pair of shoes out of the corner of my eye, but I couldn't be certain. "Could you tell me please where I could find the nearest public convenience?"

The man said, "Get out of here before I kick your head in."

I backed out, smiling uncertainly. "Grazie, signore! Dankeschön!"

There was a surveillance camera in the elevator; I didn't even glance at the notepad. Ditto for the foyer. Out on the street, I finally looked down.

I had the data from 207 microspheres. The software was already busy reconstructing Anton's trail.

I was on the verge of shouting for joy when it occurred to me that I might have been better off if I hadn't been able to follow him.

**T**he first place he'd gone from the restaurant looked like home; no one answered the door, but I could glimpse posters of several of the continent's most pretentious rock bands through the windows. If not his own, maybe a friend's place, or a girlfriend's. I sat in an open-air café across the street, sketching the visible outline of the apartment, guessing at walls and furniture, playing back the trace for the hours he'd spent there, then modifying my guesses, trying again.

The waiter looked over my shoulder at the multiple exposure of stick figures filling the screen. "Are you a choreographer?"

"Yes."

"How exciting! What's the name of the dance?"

"'Making Phone Calls And Waiting Impatiently.' It's an hommage to my two idols and mentors, Twyla Tharp and Pina Bausch." The waiter was impressed.

After three hours, and no sign of life, I moved on. Anton had stopped by at another apartment, briefly. This one was occupied by a thin blonde woman in her late teens.

I said, "I'm a friend of Anton's. Do you know where I could find him?"

She'd been crying. "I don't know anyone by that name." She slammed the door. I stood in the hallway for a moment, wondering: Did I kill him? Did someone detect the spheres, and put a bullet in his heart because of them? But if they'd found them, they would have destroyed them; there would have been no trail to follow.

He'd only visited one more location before taking a car trip to the canal, lying very still. It turned out to be a detached two-storey house in an upmarket district. I didn't ring the doorbell. There was no convenient observation post, so I did a single walk-by. The curtains were drawn, no vehicles were parked nearby.

A few blocks away, I sat on a bench in a small park and started phoning databases. The house had been leased just three days before; I had no trouble finding out about the owner – a corporate lawyer with property all over the city – but I couldn't get hold of the new tenant's name.

Vienna had a centralized utilities map, to keep people from digging into underground power cables and phone lines by accident. Phone lines were useless to me; no one who made the slightest effort could be bugged that way any more. But the house had natural gas; easier to swim through than water, and much less noisy.

I bought a shovel, boots, gloves, a pair of white overalls, and a safety helmet. I captured an image of the gas company logo from its telephone directory entry, and jet-sprayed it onto the helmet; from a distance, it looked quite authentic. I summoned up all the bravado I had left, and returned to the street – beyond sight of the house, but as close to it as I dared. I shifted a few paving slabs out of the way, then started digging. It was early afternoon; there was light traffic, but very few pedestrians. An old man peeked out at me

from a window of the nearest house. I resisted the urge to wave to him; it wouldn't have rung true.

I reached the gas main, climbed down into the hole, and pressed a small package against the PVC; it extruded a hollow needle which melted the plastic chemically, maintaining the seal as it penetrated the walls of the pipe. Someone passed by on the footpath, walking two large slobbering dogs; I didn't look up.

The control box chimed softly, signalling success. I refilled the hole, replaced the paving slabs, and returned to the hotel for some sleep.

I'd left a narrow fibre-optic cable leading from the buried control box to the unpaved ground around a nearby tree, the end just a few millimetres beneath the soil. The next morning, I collected all the stored data, then went back to the hotel to sift through it.

Several hundred bugs had made it into the house's gas pipes and back to the control box, several times – eavesdropping in hour-long overlapping shifts, then returning to disgorge the results. The individual sound tracks were often abysmal, but by processing all of them together, the software could usually come up with intelligible speech.

There were five voices, three male, two female. All used French, though I wouldn't have sworn it was everyone's native tongue.

I pieced things together slowly. They didn't have the icon – they'd been hired to find it, by someone called Katulski. Apparently they'd paid Anton to keep an ear to the ground, but he'd come back to them asking for more money, in exchange for not switching his loyalty to me. The trouble was, he really had nothing tangible to offer... and they'd just had a tip-off from another source. References to his murder were oblique, but maybe he'd tried to blackmail them in some way when they'd told him he was no longer needed. One thing was absolutely clear, though: they were taking turns watching an apartment on the other side of the city, where they believed the man who'd killed De Angelis would eventually show up.

I hired a car and followed two of them when they set out to relieve the watch. They'd rented a room across the street from their target; with my IR binoculars I could see where they were aiming theirs. The place under observation looked empty; all I could make out through the tatty curtains was peeling paint.

I called the police from a public phone; the synthesized voice of my notepad spoke for me. I left an anonymous message for the cop who'd interrogated me, giving the code which would unlock the data in the microspheres. Forensic would have found them almost immediately, but extracting the information by brute-force microscopy would have taken days.

Then I waited.

Five hours later, around three a.m., the two men I'd followed left in a hurry, without replacements. I took out my photo of De Angelis and inspected it in the moonlight. I still don't understand what it was about her that held me in her sway; she was either a thief, or a fool. Possibly both. And whatever she was, it had killed her.

I said, "Don't just stand there smirking as though you know all the answers. How about wishing me luck?"

The building was ancient, and in bad repair. I had no trouble picking the lock on the front door, and though the stairs creaked all the way to the top floor, I encountered no one.

There was a tell-tale pattern of electric fields detectable through the door of apartment 712; it looked as if it was wired-up with ten different kinds of alarm. I picked the lock of the neighbouring apartment. There was an access hatch in the ceiling – fortuitously right above the sofa. Someone below moaned in their sleep as I pulled my legs up and closed the hatch. My heart was pounding from adrenaline and claustrophobia, burglary in a foreign city, fear, anticipation. I played a torch-beam around; mice went scurrying.

The corresponding hatch in 712 was guarded just like the door. I moved to another part of the ceiling, lifted away the thermal insulation, then cut a hole in the plaster and lowered myself into the room.

I don't know what I'd expected to find. A shrine covered with icons and votive candles? Occult paraphernalia and a stack of dusty volumes on the teachings of Slavonic mystics?

There was nothing in the room but a bed, a chair, and a VR rig – plugged into the phone socket. Vienna had kept up with the times; even this dilapidated apartment had the latest high-bandwidth ISDN.

I glanced down at the street; there was no one in sight. I put my ear to the door; if anyone was ascending the stairs, they were far quieter than I'd been.

I slipped the helmet over my head.

The simulation was a building, larger than anything I'd ever seen, stretching out around me like a stadium, like a colosseum. In the distance – perhaps 200 metres away – were giant marble columns topped with arches, holding up a balcony with an ornate metal railing, and another set of columns, supporting another balcony... and so on, to six tiers. The floor was tile, or parquetry, with delicate angular braids outlining a complex hexagonal pattern in red and gold. I looked up – and, dazzled, threw my arms in front of my face (to no effect). The hall of this impossible cathedral was topped with a massive dome, the scale defying calculation. Sunlight poured in through dozens of arched windows around the base. Above, covering the dome, was a figurative mosaic, the colours exquisite beyond belief. My eyes watered from the brightness; as I blinked away the tears, I could begin to make out the scene. A haloed woman stretched out her hand –

Someone pressed a gun barrel to my throat.

I froze, waiting for my captor to speak. After a few seconds, I said in German, "I wish someone would teach me to move that quietly."

A young male voice replied, in heavily accented English: "'He who possesses the truth of the word of Jesus can hear even its silence.' Saint Ignatius of Antioch." Then he must have reached over to the rig control box and turned down the volume – I'd planned to do that myself, but it had seemed redundant – because I suddenly realized that I'd been listening to a blanket of white noise.

He said, "Do you like what we're building? It was inspired by the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople – Justinian's Church of the Divine Wisdom – but it's not a slavish copy. The new architecture has no need to make concessions to gross matter. The original in

Istanbul is a museum, now – and of course it was used as a mosque for five centuries before that. But there's no prospect of either fate befalling this holy place."

"No."

"You're working for Luciano Masini, aren't you?"

I couldn't think of a plausible lie which would make me any more popular. "That's right."

"Let me show you something."

I stood rigid, prepared, hoping he was about to take the helmet off me. I felt him moving, through the gun barrel...then I realized that he was slipping on the rig's data glove.

He pointed his hand, and moved my viewpoint; blindly for him, which impressed me. I seemed to slide across the cathedral floor straight towards the sanctuary, which was separated from the nave by a massive, gilded latticework screen, covered in hundreds of icons. From a distance, the screen glinted opulently, the subjects of the paintings impossible to discern, the coloured panels making up a weirdly beautiful abstract mosaic.

As I drew closer, though, the effect was overwhelming.

The images were all executed in the same "crude" two-dimensional style which I'd derided in Masini's missing baseball card – but here, together en masse, they seemed a thousand times more expressive than any overblown Renaissance masterpiece. It was not just the fact that the colours had been "restored" to a richness no physical pigment had ever possessed: reds and blues like luminous velvet, silver like white-hot steel. The simple, stylized human geometry of the figures – the angle of a head bowed in suffering, the strange dispassionate entreaty of eyes raised to heaven – seemed to constitute a whole language of emotions, with a clarity and precision which cut through every barrier to comprehension. It was like writing before Babel, like telepathy, like music.

Or maybe the gun at my throat was helping to broaden my aesthetic sensibilities. Nothing like a good dose of endogenous opiates to throw open the doors of perception.

My captor pointed my eyes at an empty space between two of the icons.

"This is where Our Lady of Chernobyl belongs."

"Chernobyl? That's where it was painted?"

"Masini didn't tell you anything, did he?"

"Didn't tell me what? That the icon was really 15th-century?"

"Not 15th. 20th. 1986."

My mind was racing, but I said nothing.

He recounted the whole story in matter-of-fact tones, as if he'd been there in person. "One of the founders of the True Church was a worker at the number-four reactor. When the accident happened, he received a lethal dose within hours. But he didn't die straight away. It was two weeks later, when he truly understood the scale of the tragedy – when he realized that it wasn't just hundreds of volunteers, firemen and soldiers, who'd die in agony in the months to follow...but tens of thousands of people dying in years to come; land and water contaminated for decades; sickness for generations – that Our Lady came to him in a vision, and She told him what to do.

"He was to paint Her as the Vladimir Mother of God – copying every detail, respecting the tradition. But in

truth, he would be the instrument for the creation of a new icon – and She would sanctify it, pouring into it all of Her Son's compassion for the suffering which had taken place, His rejoicing in the courage and self-sacrifice His people had shown, and His will to share the burden of the grief and pain that was yet to come.

"She told him to mix some spilt fuel into the pigments he used, and when it was completed to hide it away until it could take its rightful place on the iconostasis of the One True Church."

I closed my eyes, and saw a scene from a TV documentary: celluloid movie footage taken just after the accident, the image covered with ghostly flashes and trails. Particle tracks recorded in the emulsion; radiation damage to the film itself. That was what Hengartner's "scratch" had meant – whether it was a real effect which appeared when he photographed the icon with a modern camera, or just a stylized addition created by computer. It was a message to any prospective buyer who knew how to read the code: This is not what the commentary says. This is a rarity, a brand new icon, an original. *Our Lady of Chernobyl. Ukrainian, 1986.*

I said, "I'm surprised anyone ever got it onto a plane."

"The radiation is barely detectable, now; most of the hottest fission products decayed years ago. Still...you wouldn't want to kiss it. And maybe it killed that superstitious old man a little sooner than he would have died otherwise."

Superstitious? "Hengartner...thought it would cure his cancer?"

"Why else would he have bought it? It was stolen in '93, and it disappeared for a long time, but there were always rumours circulating about its miraculous powers." His tone was contemptuous. "I don't know what religion that old fart believed in. Homeopathy, maybe. A dose of what ailed him, to put it right again. The best whole-body scanners can pick up the smallest trace of strontium-90, and date it to the accident; if Chernobyl caused his cancer, he would have known it. But your own boss, I imagine, is just an old fashioned Mariolater, who thinks he can save his granddaughter's life if he burns all his money at a shrine to the Virgin."

Maybe he thought he was goading me; I didn't give a shit what Masini believed, but a surge of careless anger ran through me. "And the courier? What about her? Was she just another dumb, superstitious peasant to you?"

He was silent for a while; I felt him change hands on the gun. I knew where he was now, precisely; with my eyes closed, I could see him in front of me.

"My brother told her there was a boy from Kiev, dying from leukaemia in Vienna, who wanted a chance to pray to Our Lady of Chernobyl." All of the contempt had gone out of his voice, now. And all of the pompous scriptural certainty. "Masini had told her about his granddaughter; she knew how obsessed he was, she knew he'd never part with the icon willingly, not even for a couple of hours. So she agreed to take it to Vienna. To deliver it a day late. She didn't believe it would cure anyone. I don't think she believed in God at all. But my brother convinced her that the boy had the right to pray to the icon...to take

some comfort from doing that. Even if he didn't have five million Swiss francs."

I threw a punch, the hardest I'd thrown in my life. It connected with flesh and bone, jarring my whole body like an electric shock. For a moment I was so dazed that I didn't know whether or not he'd squeezed the trigger and blown half my face away. I staggered, and pushed the helmet off, icy sweat dripping from my face. He was lying on the floor, shuddering with pain, still holding the gun. I stepped forward and trod on his wrist, then bent down and took the weapon, easily. He was 14 or 15 years old, long-limbed but very emaciated, and bald. I kicked him in the ribs, viciously.

"And you played the pious little cancer victim, did you?"

"Yes." He was weeping, but whether it was from pain or remorse, I couldn't tell.

I kicked him again. "And then you killed her? To get your hands on the fucking Virgin of Chernobyl who doesn't even work any fucking miracles?"

"I didn't kill her!" He was bawling like an infant. "My brother killed her, and now he's dead. He didn't mean to, but he panicked, and he killed her, and now he's dead too."

His brother was dead? "Anton?"

"He went to tell Katulski's goons about you." He got the words out between sobs. "He thought they'd keep you busy... and he thought, maybe if they were fighting it out with you, we might have a chance to get the icon out of the city."

I should have guessed. What better way to hunt for a stolen icon, than to traffic in them yourself? And what better way to keep track of your rivals than to pretend to be their informant?

"So where is it now?"

He didn't reply. I slipped the gun into my back pocket, then bent down and picked him up under the arms. He must have weighed about 30 kilos, at the most. Maybe he really was dying of leukaemia; at the time, I didn't much care. I slammed him against the wall, let him fall, then picked him up and did it again. Blood streamed out of his nose; he started choking and spluttering. I lifted him for a third time, then paused to inspect my handiwork. I realized I'd broken his jaw when I'd hit him, and probably one of my fingers.

He said, "You're nothing. Nothing. A blip in history. Time will swallow up the secular age – and all the mad, blasphemous cults and superstitions – like a mote in a sandstorm. Only the True Church will endure." He was smiling bloodily, but he didn't sound smug, or triumphant. He was just stating an opinion.

The gun must have reached body temperature in the pocket of my jeans; when he pressed the barrel to the back of my head, at first I mistook it for his thumb. I stared into his eyes, trying to read his intentions, but all I could see was desperation. In the end, he was just a child alone in a foreign city, overwhelmed by disasters.

He slid the barrel around my head, until it was aimed at my temple. I closed my eyes, clutching at him involuntarily. I said, "Please – "

He took the gun away. I opened my eyes just in time to see him blow his brains out.



**A**ll I wanted to do was curl up on the floor and sleep, and then wake to find that it had all been a dream. Some mechanical instinct kept me moving, though. I washed off as much of the blood as I could. I listened for signs that the neighbours had woken. The gun was an illegal Swedish weapon with an integral silencer, the round itself had made a barely audible hiss, but I wasn't sure how loudly I'd been shouting.

I'd been wearing gloves from the start, of course. The ballistics would confirm suicide. But the hole in the ceiling and the broken jaw and the bruised ribs would have to be explained, and the chances were I'd shed hair and skin all over the room. Eventually, there would have to be a trial. And I would have to go to prison.

I was almost ready to call the police. I was too tired to think of fleeing, too sickened by what I'd done. I hadn't literally killed the boy – just beaten him, and terrorized him. I was still angry with him, even then; he was partly to blame for De Angelis's death. At least as much as I was to blame for his.

And then the mechanical part of me said: Anton was his brother. They might have met, the day he was killed – at Anton's place, or the apartment with the thin blonde girl. Trodden the same floor for a while. Wiped their feet on the same doormat. And since that time, he might have moved the icon from one hiding place to another.

I took out my notepad, knelt at the feet of the corpse, and sent out the code.

Three spheres responded.

**I** found it just before dawn, buried under rubble in a half-demolished building on the outskirts of the city. It was still in the attaché case, but all the locks and alarms had been disabled. I opened the case, and stared at the thing itself for a while. It looked like the catalogue photograph. Drab and ugly.

I wanted to snap it in two. I wanted to light a bonfire and burn it. Three people were dead, because of it.

But it wasn't that simple.

I sat on the rubble with my head in my hands. I couldn't pretend that I didn't know what the icon meant to its rightful owners. I'd seen the church they were building, the place where it belonged. I'd heard the story – however apocryphal – of its creation. And if talk of divine compassion for the dead of Chernobyl being channelled into a radioactive Christmas card was meaningless, ludicrous bullshit to me...that wasn't the point. De Angelis had believed none of it – but she'd still blown her job, she'd still gone to Vienna of her own free will. And I could dream of a perfect, secular, rational world all I liked...but I still had to live, and act, in the real one.

I was sure I could get the icon to Masini before I was arrested. He wasn't likely to hand over all his worldly goods, as promised, but I'd probably be able to extract several billion lira from him – before the kid died, and his gratitude faded. Enough to buy myself some very good lawyers. Good enough, perhaps, to keep me out of prison.

Or I could do what De Angelis should have done, when it came to the crunch – instead of defending Masini's fucking property rights to the death.

I returned to the apartment. I'd switched off all the

alarms before leaving, I could enter through the door this time. I put on the VR helmet and glove, and wrote an invisible message with my fingertip in the empty space on the iconostasis.

Then I pulled out the phone plug, breaking the connection, and went looking for a place to hide until nightfall.

**W**e met just before midnight, outside the fairground to the city's north-east, within sight of the Ferris wheel. Another frightened, expendable child, putting on a brave front. I might have been the cops. I might have been anyone.

When I handed over the attaché case, he opened it and glanced inside, then looked up at me as if I was some kind of holy apparition.

I said, "What will you do with it?"

"Extract the true icon from the physical representation. And then destroy it."

I almost replied: You should have stolen Hengartner's image file instead, and saved everyone a lot of trouble. But I didn't have the heart.

He pressed a multilingual pamphlet into my hands. I read it on my way to the subway. It spelt out the theological differences between the True Church and the various national versions of Orthodoxy. Apparently it all came down to the question of the incarnation; God had been made information, not flesh, and anyone who'd missed that important distinction needed to be set right as soon as possible. It went on to explain how the True Church would unify the Eastern Orthodox – and eventually the entire Christian – world, while eradicating superstitions, apocalyptic cults, virulent nationalism, and atheistic materialism. It didn't say anything, one way or the other, about anti-semitism, or the bombing of mosques.

The letters decayed on the page, minutes after I'd read them. Triggered by exhaled carbon dioxide? These people had appropriated the methods of some strange gurus indeed.

I took out my photo of De Angelis.

"Is this what you wanted of me? Are you satisfied?"

She didn't reply. I tore up the image and let the pieces flutter to the ground.

I didn't take the subway. I needed the cold air to clear my head. So I walked back into the city, making my way between the ruins of the incomprehensible past, and the heralds of the unimaginable future.

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**Greg Egan**, who lives in Perth, Australia, is hard at work on a third sf novel, provisionally entitled *Distress*. His second, *Permutation City*, is due for publication imminently. His last short story for *Interzone*, "Chaff" (issue 78), has already been snapped up by editor Gardner Dozois for his forthcoming Year's Best Science Fiction anthology.

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# Airs from Another Planet

## Sarah Ash

The manuscripts had lain gathering dust in the Conservatoire Library for countless years: a suite of ancient airs and dances; mystical songs of an antique and piquante melancholy...

The name of the composer, inscribed in an ornate, old-fashioned hand, was unfamiliar.

Rueil Serafin.

Yet when I sat down to analyse the music, it defied my skills. I could describe the harmonic progressions, the form, the architectural proportions according to the differing theories of several eminent musicologists. The closer I penetrated to the heart of the mystery, the more elusive it became. It was almost as if Serafin had opened a casement into another dimension.

Cilia and I gave the first performance of my transcriptions at court that summer... the songs suited my Cilia's glowing voice as if they had been written for her.

Prince Ilsevir summoned me to his privy chambers after the concert. His eyes were red-rimmed and when he spoke, his voice trembled with emotion.

"You have unearthed a rare talent, Professor Capelian. A unique voice, speaking straight to the heart from the dusty shadows of the past."

A keen amateur player, he begged me to transcribe more of Serafin's work. He opened the Royal Libraries to me. I searched and searched... but to no avail. No portraits. No documents. Not even a record of the man's decease.

I set Marles, my secretary-valet, to sift through the court annals whilst I attended on the Prince.

"I've been thinking, Capelian." The Prince looked up at me from the frets of his theorbo. "Next summer I shall be 21. I want to commission an Ode to celebrate my birthday: drums, trumpets, double choir, you know the kind of thing..."

My hand stilled as I reached to turn a page of the score; my fingers trembled slightly. Such a commission would establish the fortunate composer as the most eminent in Bel'Esstar –

"By rights the commission should go to old Talfiere at the Conservatoire but I don't like his style. Indigestible, dry counterpoints." He made a moue of displeasure. "So I've decided to award the commission to you."

My brain was ablaze with grandiose themes and soaring fanfares as I hurried home to my apartments. At last – the recognition I had been waiting for so long.

In Bel'Esstar if one lacks "connections," one might as well abandon all hopes of a musical career. My slow rise from obscurity had been hampered by setbacks and disappointments; I had no illustrious patron to protect me. I watched in frustration as fellow student after student – significantly less talented than myself – rose to positions of esteem within the Prince's household, whilst I was forced to eke out some kind of a living tutoring the spoilt children of the petty nobility and laboriously transcribing the scores in the Conservatoire Library. Maybe it was thought that, as a foundling child, I must in some way make reparation for my dead mother's shame... whoever she had been...

When I emerged from the Prince's apartments next day, Marles was waiting for me.

He had copied out an obscure entry from the court annals. The first clue in a long, frustrating search:

"Most eminent and revered Potentate,

"In answer to your enquiry as to the health of your court musician Rueil Serafin I enclose the report from the Head Physician at the Sanatorium:

"Could find no physical reason to explain this devastating collapse though much struck by the unique irises of the man's eyes. He is a native of the distant city of Sulien; I have read that children are sometimes born there with these richly-variegated irises but never before have I seen proof positive. Such children are said to possess phenomenal musical gifts..."

"Come, Marles." Sweat was trickling down my forehead although it was a chilly autumn day; I tugged off my heavy court perruque, thrusting it into his hands. "The Sanatorium!"

As the fiacre jogged over the cobbles, the name of the place whispered again and again through the chambers of my brain.

Sulien.

Resonance of another mystery. A mystery that intimately concerned me. To the gallants of the court,

Sulien was nothing more than a faded watering place, once fashionable as a royal spa...but now a resort for the aged, the gout-ridden and the poxed.

All I had from the Foundling Hospital was a scrap of a tavern bill found tucked in my swaddling clothes. The writing on the back begged the finder to take care of the child; the name of the tavern was "Capelian's Astrolabe" after the explorer. On enquiry, the tavern-keeper swore and said that the cursed Sulien whose had died of the puerperal fever. He had employed her as a ballad singer, not realizing that she was already with child, some courtier's unwanted bastard.

She had been known under the name of Epinette Celestin.

All further enquiries, I was told, had proved fruitless. The woman who may have been my mother had gone to her grave, taking her secrets with her.

I sat agitatedly tapping a staccato tattoo on the Physician's lacquered desk. Why would he not permit me to look in the records for myself? What had he to conceal?

"I'm so sorry to have kept you waiting, Professor Capelian." The Physician reappeared, a dusty ledger in his arms. "My librarian's filing system is somewhat eccentric."

"You have found something?" I could not conceal the eagerness in my voice. Even Marles's countenance betrayed a certain uncharacteristic animation.

"Very little, I'm afraid. A century ago the records were not so scrupulously kept as they are now. There are lacunae, lamentable lacunae...."

The entry was stark in its brevity: "Serafin raving. Transferred to Asylum in Sulien."

"Mad?" I said in disbelief.

"Apparently so. He had twice attempted his own life."

"And the reference to the unusual coloration of his eyes -"

"Take a look at this old monograph, 'A Discourse on the Ancient Citie of Sulien and its Healing Springs.' It's discredited now from a medical point of view, you understand, and no-one else seems to have bothered to investigate the subject."

"Legend relates that the citie was founded by invaders from far across the seas. The strangers called themselves 'Lifhendil' which approximately translates into our modern tongue as Songspinners. The legend tells that their gift for music was so great, they could charm the birds from the trees with their singing."

"I have heard it said hereabouts that once in a generation or so, a child is born with Songspinner gifts. Apparently these unique throwbacks can be identified by their eyes which display multi-coloured irises of great beauty. I attempted to seek one such out, curioser to see for myself and was told there was a poore girl, greatly afflicted, in the Asylum. I made haste to see her, only to arrive to the sad news that, in her confusion and despair, she had thrown herself from the uppermost room the day before and had dashed out her brains on the cobbles below."

"The gift is not a gift. It carries the curse of madness with it. Like the rare and graceful dragonflies which haunt the water meadows here, the Song-

spinners live a short intense life, gladdening all with their unique gifts before their genius is brutally extinguished in a cruel and devastating loss of reason."

I removed my pebble-lensed spectacles and peered tentatively at my reflection in the candle-lit mirror. My eyesight had always been weak and the years spent painstakingly transcribing others' works had not improved its acuity. With age, the irises had faded...and so few people commented on—or even noticed—the faint veins of colour, amber, pink and violet, marbling the blue.

If I was truly of Sulien descent, was it possible that dilute Lifhendil blood ran in my veins through the Sulien courtesan who had called herself Epinette Celestin, singer?

It was well past midnight when I entered Cilia's bed-chamber.

One bare shoulder gleamed, pale as a lily, in the darkened room; the air was heavy with the scent of tuberose. When I bent to kiss the smooth flesh, she turned over and groaned, still half-asleep.

"Oh nooo...not tonight, Tarquin...I need my rest, I'm singing tomorrow..."

I sighed and straightened up. There had been a time when she had been only too willing, my little Cilia. Now...

Alone in my brocade-curtained bed, I stared at the close-clustering shadows.

Jaded, I was so jaded, I had even lost my appetite for Cilia. Nothing aroused me, nothing inspired me.

In the shadows, a face glimmered. Eyes stared at me, rainbow eyes, pale irises glittering like opalfire. Alien eyes.

"Rueil?" My voice was a whisper, the scratch of a nib across vellum. Dizzy and sick, I staggered out of bed, tugging at the smothering curtains, throwing them wide.

There was no-one there.

Now I knew no peace. A spectre stalked me as I walked the colonnaded streets of Bel'Esstar. A shadow darkened the manuscript paper when I settled down to composition.

Serafin the Songspinner.

I stared at the scraps of material I had composed, the sketches that I intended to develop into the Birthday Ode for Prince Ilsevir, the work that would confirm my reputation as a composer. They seemed facile. Banal. Empty. Compared with Serafin's antique gems, they were dross, paste stones that would expose me as a musical fake, a charlatan.

My fingers strayed over the clavier keys, searching...

I stopped. I was not playing my music...but his. I could not rid my brain of it. Such simplicity. Yet such profundity. It spoke directly to the heart. Heart-wound.

I rose from the keyboard and seizing my paltry sketches, ripped them to shreds and cast them onto the fire.

**“Y**ou've been looking a bit off-colour of late, Capelian. By all means go take the waters in Sulien. I'm told they taste abominable!"

"Your Royal Highness is too generous." I bowed low before Prince Ilsevir. "A rest in Sulien will afford me the quiet I need to finish the Ode."

"Finish" implied it was nearing completion; the Prince was of course unaware I had burned the most recent draft that very morning.

"I'm expecting a masterwork. Something to rival Rueil Serafin's compositions – nothing less!"

I winced.

The Mayor of Sulien welcomed my little entourage with a formal ceremony at the Pump Rooms where we were obliged to partake of a cloying dessert wine and dry sponge cakes. Cilia's extravagant hat was admired by all the ladies of Sulien; her ill-humour began to lift when she realized that she was to be feted as the doyenne of fashion. I stared impatiently around the assembled company; many eyes glanced coyly back, hazel, blue, brown, grey...but nowhere could I see the dazzlingly iridescent eyes of my dream.

A dream. Maybe the Sulien Songspinners were only some eccentric fancy of the writer of the monograph. All I could see here was an ill-assorted group of faded provincials trying to ape Bel'Esstar society... and failing grotesquely.

"Are you all right, Professor?" Marles at my elbow, whispering discreetly in my ear.

Eyes. Grey eyes, blue eyes, green eyes, staring at me –

"The heat from the mineral springs," I muttered, grateful for his intervention.

Eyes staring –

"Shall I call a physician, Professor?"

"Just... fatigued after the journey. Not been sleeping too well of late, Marles. A good night's rest will restore me."

**I**gazed down at the myriad black dots scuttling across the stave paper.

"Hail, bright roseate Day, O hail..."

I was gripped by a kind of musical paralysis. All night I had sensed his shadow, gazing over my shoulder, his silent presence belittling my efforts. And a horrible presentiment gripped me, a voice, fusty as mouldering cerecloths, whispered that I should never complete the Ode until I had discovered his fate.

Yet why had I not gone directly to the Asylum? Was it because I feared what I might learn there? That our fates were somehow inextricably intertwined?

At the lowest ebb of the night, a sudden current of music began to flow through my sluggish brain, a shimmering, translucent quicksilver that burnt away the dross, creating intricate new links, opening up new pathways.

It was unlike anything I had ever composed. It was unlike anything I had ever heard. I seemed to be merely a channel through which this alien emanation was flowing, I seemed to have lost all will of my own –

"What do you want of me, Serafin?" I cried. "Why can't you leave me in peace!"

The door creaked open. A figure stood in the open

doorway, swathed in the cold brumelight of the Sulien dawn.

I started up in terror, the loose manuscript sheets spilling onto the floor.

"You called, Professor?"

It was Marles with my morning cup of hot mocha, its bitter steam wreathing like mist about his head.

"Don't tell me, Professor. You've read that confounded monograph."

The City Archivist looked wearily up at me over a mound of precariously-stacked documents.

"You mean I'm not the first –"

"To come to search for the rainbow-eyed Songspinners of Sulien? Correct."

A wisping thread of sound, faint at first, then more insistent...

"But the legend, the music –" The dingy office seemed suddenly oppressive, airless. I was having difficulty concentrating on what the Archivist was saying, even though it was of the utmost importance to me. That distant soundthread was weaving an obsessive canon in my brain.

"Is a legend, Professor. A fairy tale told to amuse children." A derisive glint illuminated the pale eyes behind the pebble lenses of his pince-nez. "Tut tut, sir! A man of reason, a man of science, come chasing moonbeams!"

Fragments of melody, all jumbled together, colliding in absurd and meaningless dissonance, sucked into an whirling soundspiral...

"And Rueil Serafin –" I fumbled for my kerchief, wiping the sweat from my throbbing temples. Had he noticed my distress? I could barely hear his words for the musical tumult yammering in my head.

"No official records exist of a Rueil Serafin."

Marles caught me as I slipped on the narrow wooden stair.

"Can't you hear it?" I clutched at his shoulders. "Tell me I'm not going crazy, Marles. Listen! Can't you hear the music?"

Marles looked at me blankly. "You need to rest, Professor. You were up all night composing. We'll take a barouche back to the hostelry –"

"No! We must go to the Asylum. And we must go now."

**T**he Sulien Asylum stood on the edge of the river marsh, a rambling, ramshackle bastion, its dismal gardens rank with strangling creepers and seeding willowherb.

"Are you sure you want to continue, Professor? You look so pale –"

I squinted at Marles from out of the confused cacophony.

"We can't go back. We have to finish this!" I snapped, turning to gaze out of the carriage window. The sudden certainty that Rueil had ended his days here amidst these mouldering weeds depressed me so profoundly that the gloom seemed to weigh like a boulder upon my chest.

The Asylum Director looked as dishevelled as his Asylum, his stained white coat unbuttoned, his hair ruffled, ill-combed. He frowned when I mentioned the name. Then his eyes lit with a wild gleam of recognition.

"Ah yes. Serafin!"

"You recognize the name?" I could not believe it.  
Jagged silverblades of sound scissored the air.

"Come this way!"

Marles and I followed the glimmer of his shabby white coat down interminable gloomy corridors until he stopped and ushered us into an ill-lit chamber lined with shelves.

The sour stink of the room was overpowering; some vile stale chymical miasma that seemed to have pickled the dusty interior and yellowed the window panes.

So loud I could see the jagged vibrations fracturing the dim light.

I backed into the corridor to take in a gulp of air.

"There! A fine specimen. A unique specimen, gentlemen."

I saw the Director carefully carrying a glass jar towards us.

"What in God's name – "

It was a brain. A human brain, floating in a hideous discoloured liquid.

"I – I don't understand – "

The pungent stench of the cloudy chymical vinegar was making my stomach heave.

"The only one of its kind. Look at the right hemisphere – overdeveloped, hm? If I lift the top section so that you can see better – "

"I beg you, sieur – " I tried to quell the rising surge of nausea.

"You can clearly see these extraordinary neural pathways – "

"You cut him up!"

"Not I, you understand. My predecessor's predecessor. He was trying to understand the underlying causes of the madness, the Accidie we call it here, that afflicts these poor wretches."

"But he dissected him – "

"Serafin was dead, Professor, he felt nothing. He died of natural causes."

"What are you saying?" I struggled to make sense of the information. "That his extraordinary musical gift was nothing but the result of some – physical defect in the brain? This – malformation?"

The suffocating stink was sickening me, filling my nostrils with its pungent odour of decay.

"And he left nothing behind? No writings? No... compositions?"

The Director let out a bark of derisive laughter.

"If you were to read the entries in the Register, you would not have asked such a question. Look. 'Serafin in an extreme manic state. He cannot abide a note of music to be sung or whistled within earshot. It sends him crazy. He claims he can hear the music in others' minds. All the time.'"

"A kind of musical telepathy?"

"A cacophony. A din. A chaos. Caused no doubt by this rapid degeneration of the neural pathways."

"And his family?"

"We have no record of any surviving relatives. His only visitor is named in the register as one Epinette Celestin, daughter... and she never returned after her first visit."

**A** single boulder on the edge of the marsh marked the communal grave-pit where Rueil Serafin lay.

So brief a flowering, his intense Elysian vision – so swiftly obscured by the rolling thunderclouds of Chaos. Had Serafin's vision been clarified by the shadow of impending madness? Or was the borderline between genius and madness so frail, the Gods' gift so volatile that it sent mortals mad?

I stood under the windswept skies, under a wild turbulence of clouds that mirrored the confusion in my mind.

Epinette Celestin. The name my Sulien-born mother had given on her deathbed.

Was I too a distant descendent of those Lifhendil invaders from far shores, even further, maybe... their sole legacy that misshapen, overdeveloped cerebrum? Or had they transmitted some memory in the blood of those far shores, those distant skies, that alien air so different from our own?

Dear Gods, was I succumbing to the madness? What had the Director called it? The Accidie? What did that mean? What – The grave-pit seemed to yawn open at my feet, I was teetering on the rim of a bottomless chasm... the ground crumbled and I found myself tumbling down, down into the dark –

I came to myself again much later. It was near to dusk.

The recital at the Concert Rooms was due to start after dinner.

"Marles?" I called muzzily. "Marles!"

Marles did not answer my call.

I looked around and saw that I was not in my rooms at the hostelry. I was in a bleak, grey chamber – no-one had come to light the lamps or the fire in the grate.

"Marles!"

"Ah! Professor Capelian." It was the Asylum Director. "You feel a little better? Your manservant has returned to the city to postpone your recital."

"What – what happened?"

Someone somewhere was whistling a tune. It was indistinct yet piercing. I wished they would stop.

"You fainted. Maybe you've been working a little too hard of late? Your pulse is somewhat irregular."

"Mm? I'm sorry. That whistling is distracting me – "

He was staring at me. "Whistling?"

"I can't hear myself think!" I snapped.

"Professor. Would you mind if I examined your eyes?"

"My eyes!" Why not my ears – they were ringing with that confoundedly incessant whistling?

"I see you wear spectacles. Let me bring this lamp close..."

I blinked in the warm pool of light that bathed my face.

"Ah," he said after a long while.

"Please. Please." I grabbed hold of him by the lapels of his stained white coat. "You've got to make him stop."

"Professor," he said, gently disengaging my fingers, backing away from me, "there is no-one whistling."

**A** ll night I lay in the darkness of the locked Asylum cell watching the splash of moonlight on the grubby walls. All night the music – his music – dinned in my brain.

I knew where it was coming from now. I had located the source.

"The legacy stops here, Serafin," I said aloud.

I could visualize it as I lay in the dark on the hard wooden bed: Serafin's brain. And now it glittered like a translucent crystal, intricate patterns of tiny lights flashed along a tracery of neural pathways, the discoloured liquid in which it was suspended now luminescent, like the moon glimpsed through clouds.

It pulsed with light. It pulsed with sound. Crystalline multiple helix of interweaving soundstrands, locked into an eternal loop.

"Break the sound-helix..." The dustdry voice whispered in my head. "Disperse the fragments... let them float free..."

There was only one way out of the Asylum and back to sanity. If only they had not locked the cell door!

Maybe I dozed a little. Voices woke me, voices murmuring outside the cell.

"Never thought to see a case in my lifetime... unique opportunity for scientific study..."

"But can you be sure?"

"The servant says his master has been acting in an uncharacteristic way for some while."

"What does that prove? Dementia takes many forms."

"I'm certain he's one of them. He has the eyes. Faded with age... but unmistakeably iridescent -"

"Trick of the light."

"Of course the only way to be absolutely certain is to dissect the cranium..."

I ran to the cell door and began to beat against it with my fists. "Let me out! By what rights do you keep me confined?"

"Professor, please do not shout, you will distress my other patients."

I could hear the clank of the Director's keys as he bent to unlock the door. The instant the door creaked open, I darted through the gap and began to run.

"Come back, Professor!"

Down the dingy corridor and out into a weed-overgrown courtyard. Voices began to clamour about me, sudden nightmare glimpse of faces staring at me from behind barred windows, wan, wild faces, their mouths gaping open, distorted -

Mad.

Yes, maybe I was mad too. Mad with this incessant tintinabulation.

"Stop him for God's sake before he does someone harm!"

I darted down another corridor, nose suddenly assailed by the stink of burning porridge.

The kitchens. A woman toiling over an iron pot on a greasy range. A porridge ladle left on the scarred worksurface - I grabbed it, hearing her scream as she cowered away from the escaped lunatic.

"That way! He went that way!"

I flung open the door of the laboratory.

The sour stench assailed my nostrils, rank with the odour of preserved human tissue that should long ago have been buried, left to rot into the wholesome soil.

There it was.

Silver-spiralling helix, spinning out a canonic web of songthreads...

In a glass jar in a row of other yellowing glass jars,

# A STUNNING NEW FANTASY EPIC

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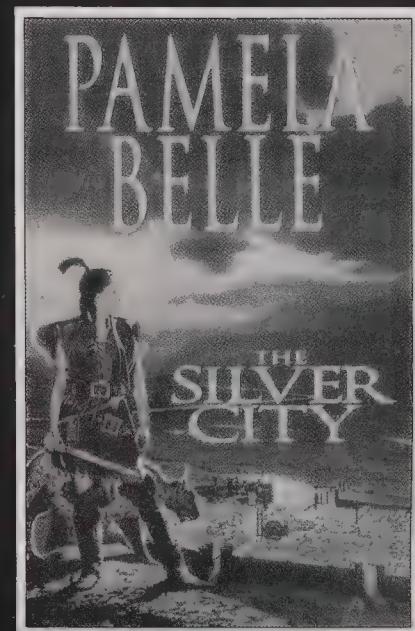
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it alone emanated this deafening, infuriating, maddening din.

Serafin's brain.

For a moment I hesitated. Then I raised the ladle high and brought it smashing down upon the jar.

The preserving fluid gushed out as the glass fragments splintered the air, spattering my clothes, my face with the rank-tasting fluid.

The brain slithered onto the floor with a dull splash. It seemed to move under its own volition, sliding across the flagstones almost as if it were – alive.

In a frenzy, I struck again and again at the horrid thing. I had assumed it would be pliant, its decomposing tissue as soft as a lightly-boiled egg. But the preserving fluid had hardened the dead lobes, giving them the consistency of rubber, they would not break up under my blows –

"Professor! Professor!"

They had hold of me by the arms, they twisted my wrists back until the ladle dropped with a clang to the floor where it lay, with the ruin of brain-tissue in the oleaginous puddles of yellow liquid.

In the shocked silence, I could hear only the rasp of my own ragged breathing.

Nothing else.

I sagged in the grip of my captors, suddenly spent. "Thank God," I whispered. "Thank God. It has stopped."

Blessed silence. Emptiness. Void.

"Professor Capelian." The Director's voice, mildly chiding, as though addressing a recalcitrant child. "Whatever can have possessed you? To ransack my laboratory, destroying all these valuable specimens?"

I saw now the smashed jars, tasted the sour air; in my rage, I had dashed the whole shelf to the ground.

"I shall pay, of course." I heard my own voice as if from a great distance, echoing in the emptiness as if we stood in the vaults of a cathedral.

"Some of these specimens were priceless. Unique."

I looked up and saw that he was regarding me in a way that made me feel distinctly uneasy.

"Was this the action of a sane man, Professor?"

"I shall pay to cover all your expenses." I felt very weary. I wanted to sleep. To sleep whilst the blessed silence still balmed my brain. "And now, please call me a fiacre. I should like to return to my lodgings."

"In the circumstances, I am afraid I must advise against that."

I continued to stare at him, not understanding.

"The good doctor here from the Sanatorium has witnessed your outburst too."

Behind him, a bespectacled, bewigged figure was nodding his head. "We cannot permit you to leave the Asylum, Professor. Not until we are sure that you will not endanger yourself – or others."

"But my recitals – my royal commission –"

"All will be taken care of."

To His Highness, Prince Ilsevir:

"Illustre,

"I am confined here against my will. I beg you – for the love you bore your faithful servant and musician – to do all in your power to have me released from this terrible place. The Director of the Asylum insists that I am a danger to myself and to others – but the truth of the matter is he has trumped up these

allegations for reasons of a morbid and sinister nature. I am certain sure that he intends to open me up, to dissect my brain for his obscure scientific researches.

"Why have you, Illustre, asked Talfiere to complete my sketches for the Birthday Ode? What does Talfiere know about my style, my philosophy, my sublime inspiration? He composes by the text-book. I have long suspected Talfiere of conspiring with the Donna Cilia to have me confined so that the lecherous old goat can –"

As you can see, serene Highness, my patient is in such a state of distress that he is incapable of finishing a simple letter. He still has intermittent periods of lucidity. But when the paranoid fit is upon him he covers page after page of manuscript paper with music of such a weird and unintelligible complexity that no musician hereabouts can make sense of it.

Is it merely the chaotic rambling of a fractured mind? Or is it, as he insists, an emanation from a world far beyond our own, the music of the spheres?

Airs from another planet?

---

**Sarah Ash** wrote "Mothmusic" (Interzone 62). Since then, and as a direct result of the appearance of that story in this magazine, she has sold her first fantasy novel to Orion/Millennium: it should appear in 1995. Sarah lives in Beckenham, Kent.

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## FOR SALE

**Interzone: The 2nd Anthology.** Paperback edition, New English Library, 1988. Stories by J.G. Ballard, Gregory Benford, Thomas M. Disch, Garry Kilworth, Paul J. McAuley, Kim Newman, Rachel Pollack, John Shirley & Bruce Sterling, Brian Stableford, Ian Watson and others – fine tales which the *Times* described as having "the quality of going right to the edge of ideas which can chill as well as warm." It's now officially out of print, but we have obtained some remainder copies for resale to *IZ* readers at just over half the original cover price – £1.75 (including postage & packing; £2.75 overseas; \$5 USA).

**Earth is the Alien Planet: J.G. Ballard's Four-Dimensional Nightmare.** A monograph by David Pringle, Borgo Press, 1979. (Now back in stock.) Copies are available from Interzone at £3.50 each (including postage & packing; £4.50 overseas; this offer not available to USA).

For either or both of these items, please send a cheque or an uncrossed postal order to: Interzone, 217 Preston Drove, Brighton BN1 6FL, UK. (US \$ bills accepted.)

# "The Cops and Hackers Can Go to Hell"

Bruce Sterling interviewed by  
Tim Concannon

**F**inding Bruce Sterling turns out to be a brief foray into Britain's own small corner of cyberspace. Because it is British, nothing works properly but everyone is too polite to admit this fact by doing anything about it. Bruce Sterling has gone AWOL from the swanky hotel where his publishers have told me I can find him. For 15 minutes my voice, person and identity become disembodied abstracts buffeted about inside Penguin's telephone switchboard, a London Hackney cab and the taxi's on-board computer respectively, as I make strenuous efforts to locate the Texan author.

I am guided to another hotel which is by no means disreputable but – when compared to the plush lodgings his publicists have arranged for him – adds to the general impression I am gaining that Bruce Sterling is enthusiastic to promote his book but would prefer not to have too much fuss made on his account in the process. He meets me at the top of a flight of stairs and tells me, quite reasonably given the circumstances, that he has been wondering where I had got to.

Bruce brews tea and says that these modest surroundings are his usual "digs" when visiting our capital. He shows me the packed schedule of signings and interviews arranged for him over the following week, taking him to Manchester the next day. I begin to eulogize the transformation of that city's centre now underway – how the red-brick husks of its Victorian Gothic streets are being gutted and relined with fibre-optic cable – an image I hope will appeal to the co-author of *The Difference Engine*.

Bruce tells me that in fact he is looking forward to visiting the city because it is where his favourite band, The Fall, comes from.

Bruce Sterling is not kidding about the "punk" bit of "cyberpunk." Were his overall appearance not neat and presentable, his haircut alone – short on top, long at the back and shaved at the sides – could well cause you to expect him to approach you on the street for spare change. He tells me his coiffure has been described as "ominously New-Right" in Germany, and he throws the term "ciderpunk" in to the conversation (presumably descriptive of army-surplus-clad anarchist cyber/cidernauts who hack into the DSS computer to inflate their benefit payments).

He is in Britain to promote his non-fiction book *The Hacker Crackdown*, a journalistic investigation into the circumstances and implications of the US Secret Service's heavy-handed attempts in 1990 to strike fear into the hearts of the burgeoning digital underground of computer criminals. Provoked in part by a crash on AT&T's long distance telephone system, which the company's security believed was caused by a computer virus installed deliberately by hackers, lightning raids on alleged transgressors' homes and work-places nationwide led to seizure of equipment and documentation without anyone being formally accused of a crime.

Sterling was prompted to start asking questions when Secret Service agents raided Steve Jackson Games (who happened to be publishing a "cyberpunk" title in their GURPS series of generic role-

playing systems), who the Federal investigators mistakenly believed to be harbouring a coven of credit-card thieves and software pirates on their electronic bulletin-board. Steve Jackson Games is based in Austin, Texas, where Bruce Sterling lives and works.

Sterling's questioning led him to talk to hackers, policemen and enraged civil libertarians. The book takes the reader on an archaeological survey of the evolving relationship of communications technology, criminality and law enforcement, from Alexander Graham Bell's invention of the telephone, to the globally accessible electronic conferences and online databases such as the Internet of the present day. As the American legal system gets *au fait* with the use and abuse of the technology, the book provides as clear and lucid a map as the general reader can hope for of the new territory that comprises America's real "cyberspace" (any information transmitted and stored by electronic means).

In the absence of adequate legislation to govern various computer-assisted crimes, the US Federal authorities have effectively granted themselves extensive powers of search and seizure in relation to electronic data. The book's account of the growing opportunities for organized crime to exploit increased information access and exchange should make British readers lose a few nights' sleep when they think about what the Security Services here – with no Constitution or Congress to hold them in check – have been saying lately about their future ambitions.

**T**his is Sterling's first book of non-fiction. He has authored four novels: *Involution Ocean* (1977), *The Artificial Kid* (1980), *Schismatrix* (1985) and *Islands in the Net* (1988); two short-story collections: *Crystal Express* (1989) and *Globalhead* (1992); he contributed to the Japanese anthology *Semi no Jo-o* (1989); and his name achieved mass exposure on airport bookshop racks the world over as one half of the byline (with William Gibson) after the title *The Difference Engine*. Sterling also pleads guilty to the charge of writing manifestos that gave definitive form to the idea of "cyberpunk." This notoriety was confirmed forever when he edited the *Mirrorshades* anthology in 1986, which featured stories by most of the writers associated with the movement in America at the time.

I ask him if the publicity attracted by this diversion from fiction has put him in a situation where, if he wants, he could become a full-time commentator on computer crime. "I did my journalist thing for a year and a half, and believe me, they can have it. My hat is off to the people who go out and get the story all day and every day, with a deadline. My hat is off to them and I don't want to be one of them, even though I have done very well by having written this book."

Nonetheless, Sterling's ambition at school was to be a pop-science journalist though he "never actually managed to do it," and he achieves a balance between his fictional and non-fictional work with articles regularly appearing in numerous publications (including, in the past, *Interzone*, where an embryonic version of *The Hacker Crackdown* appeared as "Report on the Cyberpunk Bust" in issue 44). Some sf readers will also be familiar with this facet of Bruce Sterling's writing from his science column in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, which he describes as "kind of a prestige gig rather than one that pays real money, which I nevertheless take very seriously. I hope to write an interesting science column, which is actually about science, as opposed to some drivel about 'our friend the beryllium atom.' I want to write a science column which is about stuff

like nerve gas, new construction materials, genetic engineering and some of the wilder and hairier aspects of the military-industrial complex. To hell with the Fibonacci theorem. The response has been quite gratifying — many people have written me and said that they never thought they'd recover from the crushing blow of Isaac Asimov's death. They've gone and read my science column: 'why, it's not much like Dr Asimov's was, but you know it's kinda interesting.' I am taking an enormous deviant pleasure in writing a science column in this well-established, genteel and elderly sf magazine, and just really fuckin' tearing the hide off the whole thing."

As for writing more about hackers and Secret Service agents, Sterling is unequivocal: "Well I'm not going to do any more crap about computer crime. You know, I've had it with those people."

**T**he healthy scepticism he brings to the subject of computer crime makes a refreshing change from most of the coverage it has received. Sterling's findings make compelling reading and I recommend you to read the book. Because a discussion of the finer points of its contents is not especially relevant to *Interzone*, I limit my questions regarding *The Hacker Crackdown* to asking Sterling about the extent to which he believes his renown as an author had a bearing on its coming into being. I am interested to know if he feels that being an sf writer gave him any advantage in eliciting testimony from the people he interviewed.

"I had great access to hackers, it's amazing how respectable the old wretches have been. I know a lot of people get calls from hackers. Many journalists, for instance, have written about hackers, and then have been pursued relentlessly by them afterwards. I pretty much laid it on the line, I was telling it as I saw it, yet I have got many calls from these guys who are all googly-eyed because they're talking to a science-fiction writer. Why that should be I have no idea. They don't seem to be very frightened of Secret Service agents. I don't know why they should get so you can almost see butter freeze

solid in their mouth over me. It's true, I have a lot of readers in the digital underground. That's not entirely a matter of pride, actually.

"What it did with the police I have no idea. They asked what did I do, and I just told them I'm a science-fiction writer. And they'd say, 'like Isaac Asimov?' And I'd say 'why yes,' and that seemed to do all right. I mean, it was better than me saying 'well I'm a credit-card thief by trade; I thought you'd like to tell me how one goes about committing these crimes, 'cause there's a few I haven't committed yet.' I now know that there are a lot more police who read cyberpunk novels than used to. I have many readers who are cops, and I will have more readers who are cops. In fact," Sterling declares with heavy irony "*Hacker Crackdown* is now being used as an official training text by the Internal Revenue Service. Those poor wretches.

"There's one guy — this hard-bitten New York street cop who's been out pursuing Venezuelan call-cell rings — who calls me up and says 'finally finished *Difference Engine*.' This poor, brave man. It's the only sf novel he's ever read. He met me and said he'd gone in to a bookstore and asked for one of my books, and they said 'oh yes, we have something by him. This thing: *Difference Engine*,' this vast, long thing about Victorian English brass computers of an almost Umberto Eco-like level of density. This poor man would go out and pursue these small-time electronic gangsters by day, and then by night he would sit there gamely working his way through *Difference Engine*. I was just so moved."

**G**iven the close proximity of some of the key events in the hacker crackdown to Sterling's home, I wonder what sequence of events after the Steve Jackson Games bust led him to take an interest in its proceedings. Did he feel they were under siege?

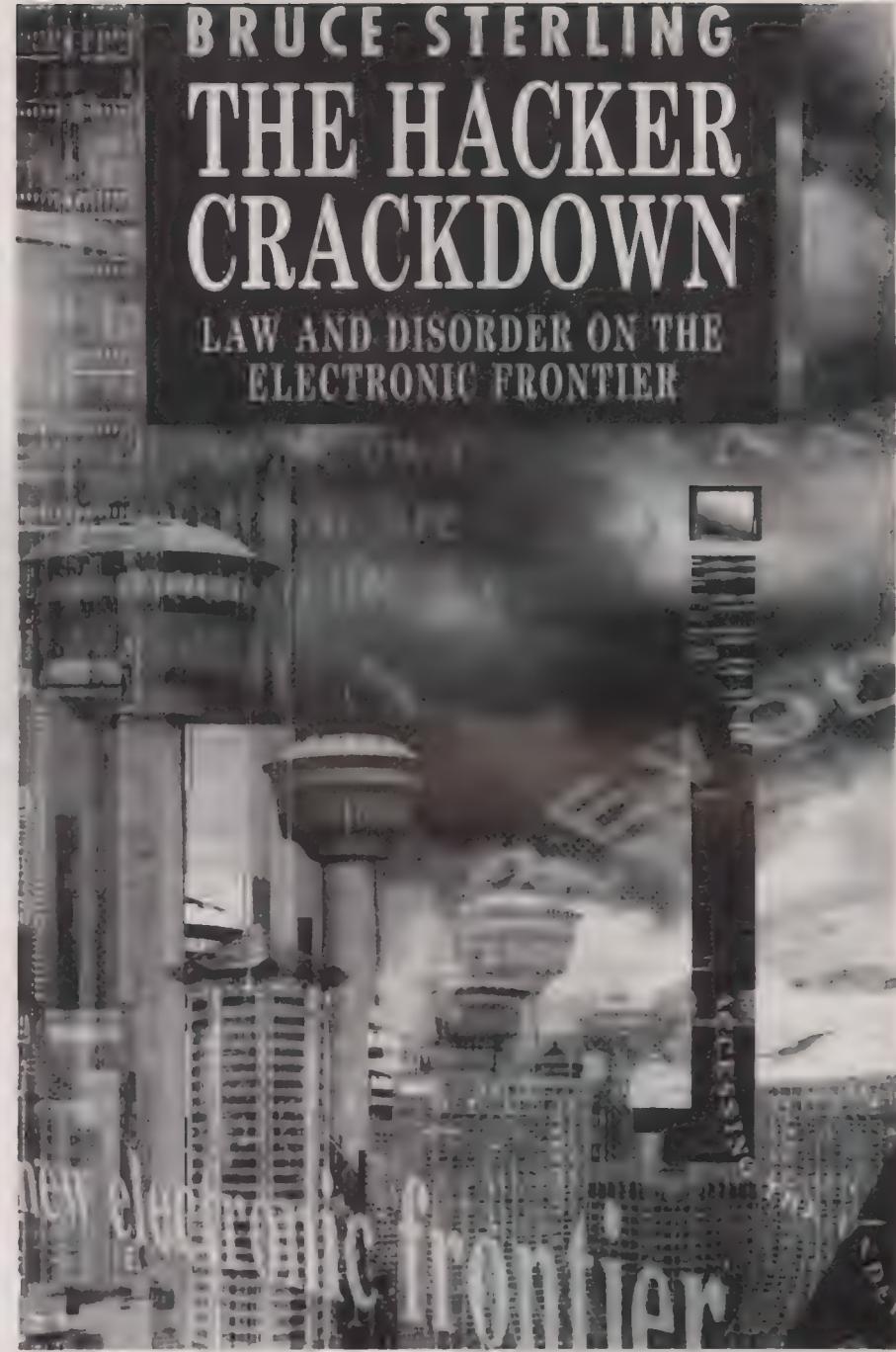
"I knew it had happened the day after it happened, because it was on the cover of the local newspaper. To be quite frank, my original reaction was not a feeling that they were under siege at all. In fact I was rather pleased in some terrible way to see that somebody who was trying to commercialize the term and actually sell a book called

Cyberpunk which had no actual cyberpunk writers in it, had gotten into enormous hot water for it. I didn't know Steve Jackson all that well – of course, I knew him professionally and we had spoken a few times – but my assumption was that he had burnt his employees or that he had committed some kind of crime. I just assumed that if the Federal Police Agency raids you, there might be a drop of a couple of days or something before they come out with some crushing indictment, and the arm-length list of allegations of whatever it is you're doing. I thought that was going to happen, and obviously the stuff about the book was neither here nor there. We were going to hear that Steve Jackson was up to his eyeballs in income-tax evasion, or whatever the hell it was. That did not happen, and when that failed to happen it was like a dog that failed to bark in the night, and I found that particular business extremely scary.

"I mean, I would not have found it particularly frightening had a small-scale publisher been involved in some kind of dodgy activity. I would have regretted it, obviously – the guy's a member of the science-fiction community, but hey, we're no angels. What bugged me was the prospect of having all your computers seized and no day in court. I just thought that was completely unacceptable. I mean that is just extra-legal harassment."

I ask how far it was into his investigation that Sterling established that he wasn't a suspect himself. "In some sense I suppose I'm still a suspect. I think there are at least some people around who don't like the idea of hippies having computers. There are people still around who resent it very much that I wrote the book that I did, and who basically don't trust my motives – don't like it that there are cyberpunks. One of my informants told me that when they go out on raids of young computer malefactors, and go into some kid's rooms and find a modem and a computer and a copy of *Neuromancer*, they just know he's bad."

Absurd though such an approach may appear to those of us with modems and heavily thumbed copies of *Neuromancer* who have so far managed to resist the



temptation to commit major credit-card fraud, Sterling is not so hasty to entirely dismiss the idea. "I don't know if there isn't a certain amount of justice in it. I mean, I really think that if you go out and read books like my books or Gibson's books, you're probably going to come out with some attitude. I hope that you would not do things that are malicious, or down-right stupid. I would also suspect that you are into some activities which are unorthodox, and/or frowned upon, because, Christ knows, I certainly was. When I was writing a lot of those books I was living the lifestyle of a wacky hippy intellectual. I don't want to, like, spell out

every misdemeanour I ever committed. I'm not trying to boast, brag or strut about my chequered past. I've never been arrested, I always pay my taxes. Heaven forbid I should cheat the phone company. I scorn even to copy computer software. I've reached the age of discretion here. I'm married, I have a kid and a mortgage. I have the ultimate telephone company hack – I can get the telephone company to do anything I want: it's called money, I just pay them. To me it doesn't matter. But if I was 16, 17, in a bedsit somewhere, no resources, all the stuff out there, no way to reach it, every temptation in the world available and bright and

energetic, but with very little in the way of a real outlet, I can see how hacking could be very tempting."

Sterling lets me continue talking to him as he is whisked through central London by taxi, and soon we are in the foyer of BBC Broadcasting House waiting for him to be interviewed by Radio 4. We stand admiring a bakelite-punk device the size of a small car, comprising an array of valves that performed some arcane function in the prehistoric past of wireless transmission.

"There's maybe as much as an entire 'K' of processing power there," Sterling observes dryly. "People don't realize they're playing with fire."

I am moved to ask Bruce if he has any sympathy with those who bemoan the demise of analogue, insisting that a digital signal, with its painting-by-numbers resolution, squeezes the life-juice out of electricity. Does he feel any nostalgia for valve technologies:

"They're just so crude compared to a chip, there's no comparison. You might as well say that flint and steel is more user-friendly than a Cricket lighter. You're always going to get a few Luddites of that sort, who are going to make a noise. I've even seen people who refuse to process their words. My good friend Howard Waldrop will have nothing whatsoever to do with word-processors. He's never written a word on a computer in his life. He has this really awful old manual typewriter. I bought a computer, and I had a lovely manual typewriter, best of the line, an Olympia B-12. Finest mechanical typewriter ever made. He won't even use an electric typewriter, mind you, it has to be manual. So I said, 'Howard, I'm never going to use this machine again, and I really would appreciate it if you would use it. I mean look at it, it's so beautiful, and this thing of yours is so wretched. I would be very pleased, if it's of any use to you – just let me give it to you on permanent loan.' He says, 'Oh thanks, that's great,' and immediately put it in his closet – never used, not for a moment. He's got to have not only a machine, but the machine he's been typing on for 17 years. It's not merely a matter of conviction on his part, it's a crutch."

I ask if Bruce suffers from a growing malaise amongst writers so besotted with the march of progress they find themselves unable to create in the old analogue format. "I do a lot of writing by hand. I don't want to be in a situation where I had to have a piece of circuitry to commit prose, because I rather expect to be put in prison some day, where they won't allow me a machine. A matchstick and a roll of toilet roll ought to be all one needs."

Sterling and William Gibson used digital technology to its full when writing *The Difference Engine*. I wonder how the presence of circuitry affected their approach to collaborative authorship. "We learned a lot about word-processing. We passed floppy disks back and forth, but our basic principle – and I think this served us well – was that our latest draft was the only draft. So if I sent him a disk, that was the only draft there was, and when I got the disk back I was forbidden to look at any other copy. So I would get it back and I would look at it, and I would see that it had been altered, but I wouldn't know exactly how, because I could not compare it with the earlier version. So if he did something I didn't like, I could change it back at will. It was just that I was forbidden to change it back mechanically, to what it had been before. So I would rewrite it, but it would always be subtly changed, even if I was attempting to restore it. So for rewrites that tended to blend things in a very interesting fashion.

"I think the real breakthrough came about halfway through the book, once we learned to mimic the third-man phenomenon, as William Burroughs calls it, I think we both realized what the book was trying to sound like. After that, we could imitate it ourselves.

"Nowadays if I were going to do it again, I would do it over the Internet. I'm a far more accomplished computer networker now than I was when I was writing *Difference Engine*. Of course I wouldn't do it with Gibson, because I don't think Gibson has warmed up his modem in five years. I'm quite the Internet hound these days, and I would not be averse to doing some network collaboration. Nothing that ambitious.

That was too much time to spend in someone else's head. It took an appallingly long time to write *Difference Engine*, (a) because it's a complex book, and (b) because we weren't quite sure what we were up to. We really wanted to write in a new kind of way that made the full use of word-processing technology. We were very aware of it being a computer-mediated text. So we used to have great, fruitless – well fruitful, but long – discussions about just what was going on and what it all meant, and so forth. We wouldn't have to do that now. It was very time consuming."

I ask if Sterling thinks that there was an extent to which, by placing *Difference Engine* in the past, they were both trying to move away from the situation where the implementations of technology described in their work was being interpreted by a section of their readership as, not necessarily prophetic, but at least as desirable. I particularly recall some footage I saw of a conference for virtual-reality groupies that William Gibson was speaking at, where he said he thought many people had missed several levels of intentional irony in his books.

"I wouldn't call it 'an attempt to escape the implications of our other work.' It's just the same thing carried out against a different milieu. Setting something in the future somehow kind of reduces its impact in a funny kind of way. There's something about that book – the way that history is chewed up – there's a kind of conceptual violence about that which you just wouldn't see by placing it in the future. We were hoping to draw people's attention to the seriousness of the transition our own society's going through. If we had just set it amongst the blue people on the planet Mongo, there's always this level of make-believe that doesn't seem to work. There's such a terrible, plausible quality about *The Difference Engine*. About half way through it you're really no longer surprised to see gas-lights and computers used in the same sentence. It makes you realize that's the way we ourselves deal with computers. Thirty years ago it would have been quite a shocking thing to think of a secretary having a computer on her desk. And now it's this thing."

**F**or his next book, Sterling is happy to carry on writing about the effects of human progress generally, unfettered by the sobriquet "cyberpunk," a term he has always been in two minds about applying to his work.

"I'm working on a novel about the Greenhouse Effect, set in 2030. It's more like my earlier novel *Islands in the Net*. I kind of question if, at this point in my career, I can manage the really unleashed flights of imagination that I used to be able to when I was a younger author. It's like mathematics: when you're 21, 22, you can really hit those high notes. You can go through the window and do bizarre stuff. This book is going to be bizarre in lots of ways, but more recognizably so. It deals with tiresome adult concerns, I guess you'd have to call them. There aren't, like winged bat-women of the dust planet in it. Which is something of a loss, especially if you're 19. I still have people writing me fan mail from my earlier novels that I had published when I was 19 and 20: 'how come you never write books about guys fighting alien monsters with harpoons? These are real books, not like the stuff with all the politics in it. How come there aren't more purple skies and triple suns and blazing this-and-that?'

"It's really very sad, but I don't seem to have it in me to that extent any more. I don't do enough hallucinogens, but you can only do so many before the mechanisms begin to fail. I'm kind of tottering around with my Diogenes lamp now, and we'll endeavour to please here. I don't want to upset my patrons in the various Federal Police departments. I'll be writing some calming and quiet material about tornadoes. The cops and the hackers can go to hell in their own way, and I'm sure they will. At least I hope to point out to a few innocent people exactly what it is that's going on and why they ought to be kind of worried about it. Having done that, what else can I do?"

Bruce Sterling's *The Hacker Crackdown* is published in paperback by Penguin at £6.99.

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# Downtime in the MKCR

## Eric Brown

Sinclair left his villa and walked down the hill to the taverna. As ever, this early in the morning, his usual table was free. He sat down in the shade and stared out across the bay. The quayside was without its picturesque line of fishing boats; they would arrive back, in ones and twos, around mid-day. The water was blindingly blue – almost too perfectly aquamarine to be true. Directly opposite the taverna, the village of Mirthios climbed the hillside, a collection of square, whitewashed buildings among the hazy green olive groves.

The proprietor – an ancient, bewhiskered woman dressed in traditional black – shuffled out with his regular breakfast: a small pot of coffee and a bowl of yoghurt.

He thanked her. Despite the situation, he was determined to convey the usual courtesies to the locals. Last night he had met a group of fellow tourists whose pragmatism had almost made him ashamed of his old-fashioned manners.

He'd complimented the proprietor on his meal.

He became aware of the four young men across the table, staring at him as if he were mad.

"You don't for a minute think that it matters, do you?" one of the men – Eddie, a computer programmer from Watford – asked him.

Sinclair blushed. "Perhaps not...but that's no reason to be rude."

Eddie had turned to one of the others and laughed.

Sinclair finished his ouzo and left. Their muttered comments had followed him back along the quayside.

One of the young men – the quiet one, who had not stared or laughed at him – had made some excuse, left the others and caught up with Sinclair.

"I'm sorry about all that. I know what you mean. It's quite natural to be civil – in fact, I think they make an effort not to be. Anyway...good night."

And the boy, whose name Sinclair had not caught – did his eyes linger, his smile widen in invitation? – sketched a wave and ran back to his drinking companions.

This morning, Sinclair had awoken to an immediate and aching regret: he should have said something, invited the boy back for a nightcap.

Here on New Crete, he knew, he was free of the constraints that inhibited him back in London. He wondered how long it might be before he convinced himself of this fact, before he could let go and enjoy

himself. Five years of living with death, of turning his mind away from the needs of his flesh, had made him insular, inadequate.

He looked up from his coffee, sure he had seen something flashing on the horizon. If it was the reflection from a boat in the morning sun, it had passed, and even the boat was not visible.

Then it flashed again. It was no boat. The corona exploded on the ocean's horizon, expanded east and west in two long, thin pincers, then vanished. He would have put it down to some natural effect – unknown to him – had he not experienced a similar effect, or anomaly, yesterday afternoon while swimming. Wading in from the shallows, the gentle tug of the undertow retarding his progress, he thought he had seen a patch of sand, up the beach beside his rattan mat, begin to swirl, the individual grains crawl in a neatly patterned spiral. As he approached the phenomenon, it had ceased. He had thought nothing more of it, putting the effect down to a trick of the sunlight and too much ouzo the night before.

Now, he began to wonder.

"You start early."

"Oh." He looked up. "Excuse me. Miles away."

"Andrew. Andy. We met last night –" This with some hesitation, as if afraid that Sinclair might not recognize him. As if!

"Of course. Nice to see you again. Won't you join me? Coffee?" He was talking too much. He was quite unused to such meetings, the possibilities that such meetings promised.

Andy wore shorts manufactured from cut-down jeans, a white tee-shirt that showed off his tanned biceps. A pair of sun-glasses were clipped by an arm to the neck of his shirt.

They exchanged meaningless smalltalk for a while, Sinclair's unease rising as he realized that he really liked the boy, was not merely infatuated by his physicality.

Andy had a gentle, unassuming manner and a sense of humour. Sinclair told himself that holiday romances never worked. And especially not here.

"For the past few years I've been directing a few things in the provinces," Sinclair found himself saying. "If I were honest, I'd admit that I was never a very good actor. But have you ever heard an actor admit as much? It's always that the lines were crap anyway, or

the directions bad, or a hundred and one other things. So I moved into directing..."

Andy seemed interested. "What have you directed recently? Anything I might have seen?"

The last thing he'd been involved with had been a Christmas pantomime at Bognor, and that had been four years ago.

"Othello, Stratford – last summer," he heard himself saying, and hated himself for the lie.

"Anyway, enough of me. What about you?"

Andy Lincoln was a quantity surveyor from Bristol, was unbelievably beautiful whichever way you looked at him, and was, Sinclair had convinced himself by now, as bent as a nine-ecu note – or I'm not a dying queen.

"Staying nearby?" Andy asked now.

Sinclair pointed to the villa on the headland. "I've got that place for a month. Perhaps, if you're not doing anything... That is – I'd like to show you around."

"Great. I'd like that."

Oh, Jesus... Sinclair had forgotten how it was, that sudden inner exquisite throb of lust mixed with the ridiculously romantic notion that, this time, it just might be love.

He wanted to tell Andy the truth, but that would destroy everything.

As they left the taverna side by side, Sinclair recalled the words of his tour operative. "Enjoy!" he'd said. "Remember, Mr Sinclair, where you're going there are no risks – and that's guaranteed."

**T**hey made love on the double bed which for the past three nights had mocked Sinclair's isolation. Later, he pulled on his shorts and stepped out onto the balcony. He stared out at the bay, the fishing boats returning through the gap between the thumb and finger of the headlands. A few tourists promenaded along the quayside before the taverna.

Sinclair recalled how it had been, all those years ago; the lovers, the wild times. Then he considered the emptiness of the past five years, the isolation and the agony. He could hardly believe his luck now. He had come to New Crete in the hope that he might find someone, but that was all it had been, a vague hope: he had reconciled himself to spending the month alone and celibate, thankful that for the period of the vacation he would be spared the pain that had plagued him over the past few months.

He tried to banish the sadness he felt: he told himself that he had found sex and affection, and that he should enjoy it while it lasted; three weeks with Andy would be better than three weeks without, even if the return to the cold reality of London, alone, would be all the more difficult after experiencing what he liked to think of as love.

He was staring at the mountains that rose behind the bay when he saw the aerial explosion. Like the other effects he'd noticed, it happened spontaneously and without warning. One second the sky was a perfect cerulean blue, and the next it was rent with a silver starburst. This time, though, the effect lasted. The blinding illumination shot out filigree vectors in every direction, so that within seconds the whole of the sky was divided into parallel strips of bright blue.

Sinclair gripped the balcony rail, overcome with sudden dizziness. What if the effect was not external,

he asked himself, but internal, a manifestation of the disease, some neural dysfunction?

He contemplated the tragedy of such an occurrence so soon after finding Andy.

Then, to his immediate relief, Andy yelled: "What the hell – ?" He ran onto the balcony and stared into the sky overhead. "What's happening?"

"You see it too? It isn't the first. I noticed one yesterday, another this morning. I thought there was something wrong with me."

Andy smiled. "It's quite spectacular. Probably some glitch in the system." He laughed when he realized that he was standing on the balcony, in full view of whoever should look up from the street below, stark naked.

He took Sinclair's hand and pulled him back into the bedroom.

**A**t sunset they left the villa and made their way down the hillside. The sky was innocent of its lateral vectors, once more a burnt-orange Mediterranean twilight.

They avoided the restaurant where Andy's erstwhile travelling companions – friends of just two days, Sinclair was pleased to learn – were eating, and selected a cosy bistro romantically overlooking the moored fishing boats. They ordered grilled squid, French beans cooked in spiced sauce, Greek salad and retsina.

They talked for hours, or rather Sinclair steered Andy into talking about himself. Sinclair experienced a deepening of affection, a heady rush of feeling he had no hope of controlling.

He asked himself why this was so wrong when it seemed so right.

Five bottles of retsina later, the sun long set and the full moon high over the bay, they finished dessert and ordered coffee.

Andy leaned back in his chair. "All this..." He looked about him, spread his hands to indicate the bay, the bistro, the two of them. "I've never been so happy for a long time."

Sinclair felt something open up within him, a wound with no hope of cure.

"Andy..." Sinclair reached across the table and gripped his wrist. "It means a lot to me, too." He thought of a way to break it gently, shook his head.

Andy stared at him. "But – what?"

Sinclair braced himself. "I'm dying – " The sudden pain in the young man's eyes made him stop.

Andy was shaking his head. "How... how long?"

"I've got two months at the most. I wanted to remain here right until the end, but according to the medics I'll be too sick during the last month to maintain the link."

Andy said nothing, just sat and stared at the table.

Sinclair closed his eyes. When he opened them he saw that Andy was crying. "I don't want you to see me, back home. I'm a walking skeleton – no, I'm a bedridden skeleton. Have you ever seen anyone with Karposi's sarcoma?" He paused, then put a hand to his chest. "This is how I looked six years ago, before the illness." He reached across the table and squeezed Andy's fingers. "I'm sorry. I should never have... It's my fault. I wanted to tell you right at the start, but at the same time I wanted you so much..."

Andy said through his tears, "There's no reason why we can't enjoy the time we have left together, in here."

"I lied, Andy. I wasn't truthful."

Andy looked up, met Sinclair's eyes. "I understand... I understand how difficult it must be."

A silence descended. Sinclair signalled the waiter. "Enough of this, okay? We're here to enjoy ourselves. How about a nightcap?"

Andy said, "Just one more thing..." he paused. "Out there, in the real world, do you have anyone to be with you?"

"Andy..." Sinclair closed his eyes, trying to banish the fact of the real world from his thoughts.

Seconds later the first explosion ripped through the warm night air.

The deafening crack seemed to detonate directly overhead. Instinctively Sinclair closed his eyes and ducked, and when he opened them again the sky was no longer midnight black, but blue. A second explosion followed hard on the first, and instantly a series of narrow white stripes laid themselves over the sky from horizon to horizon.

"Jesus Christ," Andy said, staring up in awe. "It's the Greek flag!"

Sinclair pointed out to the sea horizon, where letters stood as tall buildings.

"Kriti Popular Front," Andy read. He laughed, nervously. "I think this is more than just a minor glitch."

A jeep roared into the village and screeched to a halt on the quayside. Two armed men in army fatigues, their faces covered by balaclavas, jumped out and strode over to the crowded patio of a restaurant.

As Sinclair looked on, a part of him thinking that this was some display put on by the tour company for the benefit of the tourists, the militia took aim and fired into the massed diners. Screams took up when the rattle of gunfire ceased.

Andy was up and running towards the scene of the carnage.

Sinclair tried to stop him. "Andy!" He gave chase, knocking over tables in his haste.

The armed men sprinted back to their jeep, and were in the process of jumping aboard when the air around them became agitated. For a second the two men, the driver and the jeep slipped out of focus – then vanished.

Andy had come to a halt at the edge of the massacre. Amid overturned tables and chairs, the bodies of tourists lay dead and dying. Blood and krassi were spilled in equal measures, staining the table-clothes and the white marble floor two shades of red.

Andy was kneeling beside a blonde woman lying on her back, bullet wounds drilled across her white blouse. She was staring up at Andy, her face twisted.

"It shouldn't hurt," she said in barely a whisper, her tone incredulous. "They said nothing could hurt us!"

She winced, the colour draining from her face. As Sinclair stared down, her eyes glazed and her feeble protests ceased.

Then the bodies, one by one, lost their solidity and dissolved, along with the spilled tables and chair, the blood and the wine. Within seconds, nothing remained as evidence of the slaughter – except a ring of appalled

onlookers, strangely silent under the vast domed awning of the Greek national flag.

He grabbed Andy's arm. "Let's get out of here," he said. "Back to the villa."

As they hurried up the hillside, Andy said, as if in a daze, "They should have pulled us out. There's obviously some terrible malfunction in the system – why didn't they just pull us out?"

Sinclair tried to calm him. "They're no doubt working on it. It probably takes time."

"And what about the tourists? Did they really die?"

"Of course not! There's no way... You read the company guarantees." But he did not, even to himself, sound convincing.

They reached the villa and locked the doors behind them. In the bedroom they shut and barred the balcony door against the garish flag that served in lieu of a sky.

Andy sat on the bed and stared up at the ceiling. "If you bastards are listening in," he said, levelly, "I'd like to tell you that we want out."

Sinclair stared at his reflection in the wall mirror. It was still a shock to apprehend how he had looked six years ago, before the ravages of the disease had reduced him to little more than skin and bone. While across the room Andy quietly petitioned the operatives to pull them out, Sinclair contemplated the healthy slabs of muscle on his arms and legs.

**T**hey made love on the double bed in silence, as if they each realized that it might be for the last time. Later, while Andy slept, Sinclair disengaged himself, pulled on his shorts and walked across to the balcony. He unbolted the door, stepped through and closed it behind him.

The Greek flag no longer adorned the night sky: piercing stars shone down from a jet backdrop. He thought for an exhilarating second that perhaps the malfunction had been repaired, that perhaps he might yet see out the full span of his vacation. Then he noticed, across the bay on the slope of the opposite headland, purple and orange luminescent blobs where olive trees should have stood.

Before him, the air began to shimmer – an effect not unlike a heat haze above a hot road in summer. As he stared, a figure materialized beyond the balcony, suspended in mid-air like some phantom visitation. Fearing another attack, Sinclair stepped back – then he made out the ghostly features of the operative responsible for his translation at the Milton Keynes holiday centre.

"Mr Lewis Sinclair?"

"What is it? What's going on?"

The materialization was only partially successful. Sinclair could actually make out the bay through the bobbing figure. Its voice was slowed, slurred.

"I've come to explain the situation to all vacationers," the operative said.

"Are you going to pull us out?"

"Please, let me first explain." The figure was silent for seconds, like a radio broadcast on a poor frequency. "The Keynes computer network was breached by a team of hackers representing the Greek Popular Front. They planned to destroy the system and the five thousand vacationers currently enjoying the New Crete Consensus Reality. They are a political faction

fighting for the economic independence of Crete – they claim that since the development of the Milton Keynes CR, and other centres across Europe, tourism has ceased and Crete has suffered a debilitating recession. They also struck at other centres in Germany, France and Sweden. Fortunately, at Keynes they managed to inflict only minor damage."

"But the tourists we saw gunned down?"

"Tragically, they were real-time casualties – they suffered associative somatic trauma and perished as a result."

"Christ..." Sinclair struggled to overcome the shock, gather his thoughts. He asked, "So we're all in danger. Any second these thugs could materialize and blow us away?"

The spectral operative was shaking his head. "Not at all. We have dealt with the hackers; our own experts effected successful counter-measures. The anomalies you see now –" the figure indicated the luminescent shapes across the bay –"are the results of the disruption, minor glitches."

Sinclair felt his pulse quicken. "So we can continue with our vacation?"

"Ah...that's what I'm here to inform you."

"You're going to pull us out?"

"We deem it in the best interests of our clients if we disconnect you as soon as possible. We need to overhaul the system before the next batch of customers. Of course, you will all be adequately compensated, and you will have priority use of the MKCR when we reopen in a couple of months."

Sinclair felt a cry rising within him. He heard no more of what the operative was saying, but turned and hurried into the bedroom.

A ghostly figure was dematerializing from beside the bed. Andy was sitting up, staring through the formless haze at Sinclair with a look of shock. They came together and held onto each other, as if for dear life.

Seconds later Sinclair watched the reality around him go into a slow dissolve. He cried out, clutched at Andy's broad shoulders, but his embrace closed on nothing. Darkness swamped him. In his consciousness he recalled the horror to which he was returning, and screamed in silence.

**W**hen the medics had suggested that he spend a month in the MKCR, Sinclair had at first demurred. Would not a month of paradise make all the more appalling the reality of his situation when he returned? They had replied that surely a month of luxury would be preferable to the pain he was suffering now – and, anyway, by the time of his return he would be so drugged as to be oblivious of both the pain and the knowledge of his demise.

But he had returned three weeks early, to a skeletal frame wracked by a degree of pain he had quite forgotten. Powerful analgesics eased the worst of the agony, but nothing could obliterate the fear.

Days passed in a senseless blur. He spent great chunks of time unconscious. Occasionally he would surface and pass a few relatively pain free hours watching the sunlight through the hospital window, or staring at mindless images on the TV screen.

He was conscious, and sitting up in bed, when a nurse breezed in. "Mr Sinclair," she announced, "we

have a call for you." She hauled the vid-screen down on its extendable boom from the ceiling, positioned it before him.

He shaped his lips to form the word, "Who?"

The nurse smiled, activated the set, and left the room.

The screen remained blank. Sinclair was too weak to reach out and adjust the picture.

"Lewis?" The voice was familiar – but, at the same time, altered.

Sinclair felt his pulse quicken. With all his strength he forced himself to say, "Andy?"

"Of course. Who else? I want to see you."

A croak: "No! Please...I'm not –"

"I'm downstairs, in reception. I'm coming up." A pause, then: "I don't want to shock you, so..." Suddenly, the screen flared and showed someone staring out at him. For a second, Sinclair thought that he was looking at a mirror image of himself.

"Andy...?"

"You weren't the only one who wasn't truthful on New Crete," Andy said. "I just couldn't bring myself to admit..." He paused, then managed, "I didn't want to hurt you."

Sinclair tried to control his emotions. "And...now?"

"Now...now we need each other more than ever," Andy said. He smiled. "I'm coming up, but don't hold your breath. This might take some time." He disappeared, slowly, from the screen.

In preparation, arranging a smile of welcome, Sinclair turned his head towards the door and waited.

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**Eric Brown** is at work on a third sf novel; his second, *Engineman*, is due for publication by Pan Books imminently. He lives in Haworth, Yorkshire, and has contributed to this magazine many times before.

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# Ansible Link

## David Langford



**The Black Spot.** Are certain sf authors (as one or two have recently been enquiring in not-for-quotation circulars) really blacklisted by publishers? Or merely prey to gloom since the recession's impact on midlist sf may have left them without a market? This column offers the usual large drink for a copy of any publisher's official blacklist...

### The Club of Queer Trades

**Pat Cadigan** visited Britain in March to promote *Fools* in her inimitable way: "I expect you to be much in evidence, paying homage, while I'm in the country. It will make up for your previous failure to be slavish. You dog."

**John Clute** enjoyed many enthusiastic communications from The Women's Press about their reissue of Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* without, they eagerly confided, that awful downmarket sci-fi cover – by, as it happens, Judith Clute... (Further erasing the past, this reissue claims to be the first WP edition ever, although its publicity goes on about 20,000 mysterious prior sales.)

**Lionel Fanthorpe**, thesaurus master and once Britain's fastest-writing sf author, is to star in a new US anthology of his most splendidly awful Badger Books passages, suitable for reading aloud in public places, for expounding, declaiming, reciting, intoning, orating and elocuting...

**Cecelia Holland** has finally started reading William James's "Sunfall" trilogy, mentioned in *Interzone* 77 as bearing a curious resemblance to her 1969 historical novel *Until the Sun Falls*. Ms Holland agrees, and has been sending incandescent letters using such terms as "a corrupt paraphrase of my novel" and "he's ripped off sections of others of my novels as well." This column is nervously sure that it's all legitimate homage to an admired author, unless lawyers should decide otherwise...

**George R.R. Martin**'s fantasy trilogy "A Song of Fire and Ice" sold here for £450,000 after an epic battle of dinosaurs between Legend's John "It's my round!" Jarrold and the ultimately victorious Malcolm "It's your round!" Edwards of HarperCollins.

**Carl Sagan** complained about Apple's use of "Carl Sagan" as their internal nickname for a computer under develop-

ment. (What he especially disliked was the company of three sister projects named Tesla, Piltdown Man and Cold Fusion.) Thus the machine briefly became the BHA, short for "Butt-Head Astronomer"...only to be further renamed, in short order, the LAW: "Lawyers Are Wimps."

### Infinitely Improbable

**The Earth Moved For Them.** At last, a practical use for electronic communications: Internet reports quickly told us all that no sf people were badly injured in the Los Angeles earthquake, the only fatality being a fan-owned cat hit by bricks as a wall collapsed. Bruises, property damage and books hurled from shelves were widespread – the owner of Dangerous Visions bookshop had to be dug out from under piles of books and bookcases. Falling downstairs in the dark, the unfortunate Harlan Ellison broke his nose. One of Mike Glyer's fan Hugos leapt off a shelf and smashed a glass lamp. Unshaken, the Los Angeles SF Society held its next meeting as usual...

**The Caucus Race.** In the Arthur C. Clarke Award the shortlisted novels are *A Million Open Doors*, John Barnes; *Ammonite*, Nicola Griffith; *Vurt*, Jeff Noon; *Snow Crash*, Neal Stephenson; *The Iron Dragon's Daughter*, Michael Swanwick (I was much impressed by this one, though when a fantasy Word of Power has the syllables *sfwa ya sig* one wonders whose leg is being pulled); *The Broken God*, David Zindell. "An exceptionally strong shortlist," babbles administrator David V. Barrett, possibly conveying a coded subtext about the quality of last year's? The BCA Fantasy & SF Author of the Year Award is a new addition to the British Book Awards, presented on 10 February: in an astonishing reversal of expectations, it was won by the little-known Terry Pratchett... Collectors Awards: were Michael Crichton and Harlan Ellison's *Mefisto in Onyx* (the lettered state, of course) really the most "collectable" author and book of 1993? So says California's ace book dealer Barry R. Levin, no doubt quite impartially and with no unsold stocks of either in his cupboard... A lifetime award also goes to Arthur C. Clarke.

**Too Good To Check.** The story goes that an American Hitch-Hiker fan was

drinking with a friend who worked in a mental institution, and quoted one of the Hitcher tag-lines: "You'll need this fish in your ear," or whatever. "WHAT?" cried the psychiatrist in bogglement. It emerged that one of his locked-up patients would only respond to questions with Hitcher tags; lots of disturbed people have languages all their own, and no one had formerly recognized that this was a particularly literary madness... (They just needed a fish in the ear, really.)

**Alternate Worlds** is the imaginative title of "The World's Only Alternate History Magazine," launched in January with hefty articles by Brian Stableford and others. Quarterly, £3/issue; 48pp A4 format; contact 19 Bruce St, Rodbourne, Swindon, Wilts, SN2 2EL.

**Play It Again, Hari.** The Isaac Asimov Foundation movie is currently said to be scheduled for Christmas 1994 – directed by Jean-Jacques Annaud of *Quest for Fire* and *The Name of the Rose* fame.

**Misleading Cases.** A certain sf flavour exudes from the case, judged in New York not long ago, of *Teri Smith Tyler, Plaintiff, v. James Carter, William Clinton, Ross Perot, American Cyanamid, Iron Mountain Security Corporation, Defense Intelligence Agency, IBM, David Rockefeller, Rockefeller Fund, BCCI, Nasa, Defendants*. Try to imagine the expression on the face of District Judge Charles S. Haight, Jr, as he issued his ruling: "Plaintiff contends she is a cyborg, and that she received most of the information which forms the basis for her complaint, through 'proteus,' which I read to be some silent, telepathic form of communication." Major allegations follow: "Former President Jimmy Carter was the secret head of the Ku Klux Klan; Bill Clinton is the biological son of Jimmy Carter; President Clinton and Ross Perot have made fortunes in the death-hunting industry, and are responsible for the murder of at least 10 million black women in concentration camps, their bodies sold for meat and their skin turned into leather products. The defendants are also responsible for breeding farms, which turn out 2,000 black girls a year, who are then sold for recreational murder or as human pets. Additionally, the defendants utilize weather control and earthquake technology to threaten other countries..." This is what reading sf can eventually do to your mind.

# Mutant Popcorn

## Nick Lowe

**P**referably without stopping to worry too much about what the question means, can you remember your first art film? Don't count stuff on TV, and never mind what the film was. Think rather about the flavour of the experience: where you saw it, why you went there, and what you felt as you came out. Had you been in that kind of cinema before? Do you remember anything of the audience? Did you go with someone, and if so how did you expect the relationship to be affected? Did you feel you were enjoying the movie, or was it more important to be one of the people there watching it? Did you go to the toilets afterwards? Were you able to pee? Ah yes, you always try to forget the first time. But just like your first Guinness, your first non-chart album purchase, and of course your first 18 cert (or X, if you came of age before the Pistols), it was all inexorably part of that awkward and, in hindsight, largely ludicrous process of rebellion, bootstrapping, and aspiration to be taken seriously (not least by oneself) as a sophisticated participant in the community of big culture – and consequently, of course, as a magnet for the attention of all members of the appropriate sex capable of seeing past complexion problems and an extremely unfortunate clothes sense to the promiscuously adult soul within. That the film itself may have been something less than a revelation, and came close to putting one off Pasolini/Godard/Welles/other for life, was simply a valuable early lesson in the important principle of adult life that everything apart from homemade pizza is a bit of a disappointment.

But the nostalgic thing is that that kind of cinema, and more importantly that whole kind of cinema experience, seems largely to have faded from the ecosystem, leaving only these curious shells we persist in calling "arthouses" for a weird assortment of hermit-crab films to inhabit. I was very struck the other week, when the ICA wheeled out the beloved old Burroughs shorts for a birthday screening, by how rare nowadays is that whole experience of

cinema as church: sitting in front of a screen in a packed cinema in the full knowledge that everyone is just longing for the film to be over. In harder days, I'm sure we used to do this all the time, just as we dutifully read the Hugo book year after year long after the returns had diminished to zero. Unfortunately, it's a wrinkled truism, traditionally wheeled out in laments for the decline of repertory cinema, that the whole notion of "art film" seems to have outlived itself, and the kind of stuff that plays on art screens in the 90s has far more to do with distributors' sense of what falls into the generous space between wide release and video premiere than with any aspirational delusions.

**F**or exhibit A, just think about the medieval-frogs-out-of-water time-travel farce *Les Visiteurs*, probably the most severe marketing nightmare since Richard Gere is King David. Here, after all, is a massively assured and triumphantly profitable exercise in popular entertainment whose one major drawback is that it's in untranslatable French that in subtitle comes over with all the snappy resilience of old lard, and staggers imagining what it might sound like dubbed. ("When you sneeze, is it typhoon season?" – No no, please, mercy, our inhalers are empty and our thighs already pulsate with self-inflicted bruises.) And so it is that a film whose mission in life is to wipe its dongleberries on all that oh-so-beautifully observed and finely-played bourgeois comedy, all those fragrant and balletic Rohmer creations where elegant people piquantly fail to get off with one another for two hours, has found itself ignominiously dumped in the same "arthouse" ghetto with Blier, Serreau, and anything else with Canal+ money and rather poor done-into-American subtitles. Wry comeuppance, of course, because what *Les Visiteurs* was principally satirizing in the first place is bourgeois Gallic attitudes to class, history, and comedy itself: the equally risible aspirations of the new bourgeoisie and the

old aristocracy to one another's inheritance, as the arriviste descendants of peasants buy up chateaux and discreetly emend the family name, while the pre-revolutionary landed classes they displace slide gracefully but inexorably into genteel mediocrity. And in its homeland, the *Visiteurs'* determinedly earthy and déclassé humour of toiletry and slapstick has indeed muscled in front of its more urbane and better-bred competitors to stuff its pockets rudely with receipts.

But it's remarkable what a leveller subtitles can be. You can see exactly how the snappy pacing and well-tuned comic editing would be more than adequate, once an initial critical mass of hilarity had been achieved, to sustain a chain reaction of mirth that could keep a packed house roaring; but it's practically impossible to get the cascade started with a language divide interposed. And without that vital kindling spark, and seen from this side of the Manche, *Les Visiteurs* actually comes out looking a considerably more civilized and sartorial picture than can possibly have struck its homeland audience. For one thing, it's able to take for granted a continuity and presence of history – especially, but by no means exclusively, of the Revolution – in the national popular consciousness that would be very hard to match in the Anglophone world. For another, it's soaked to saturation in highly self-conscious cinematic cross-references, just occasionally low and Hollywood (*Robin Hood*), but mostly high and literally or spiritually European (*Lancelot du Lac*, *Martin Guerre*, *The Navigator*) – especially to the later French Buñuel, whose repeated iconic use of the dinner party as the zenith of bourgeois smugness and order *Visiteurs* has enthusiastically appropriated for its scenes of loudest eructation and mayhem.

And though it's hard to judge the quality of the verbal games from the atrociously clumsy titling, there's clearly some literate verbal hoopla going on with archaism and contemporary argot that is probably not well

served by such glosses as "She's caring his buntings," or the translation of the Baldrick character's name as "Jac-kasse" (here Harrap's French Slang, my hardworked guide through *Les Valseuses*: roman and many a smut-packed Francky Vincent lyric, let me down deplorably); and while much of the mugging is agreeably coarse, Valérie Lemercier's performance as a continental Penelope Keith is so jawswingly watchable and crafted that you find yourself swilling her every screen moment round the palate like a well-bred Chateauneuf. In fact, what Visiteurs does least well is precisely the widescreen Hollywood stuff: the broad stunt gags, the relentless slapstick assaults on the clothing and coiffure of the dignified, the tiresome bag lady who dresses like a comedienne, the inept McGuffin-driven deadline plotting, and wobbly production values that include some often quite dreadful lighting camera and colour stock that seems to have been knocked up in the Philippines. Despite all its low-denominator, Franglized ambitions (beautifully mirrored, incidentally, in such tech credits as "Matte Paintings Numériques" and "Morphings 3D"), it's a film that in translation looks dangerously witty, intelligent, and European. Just try not to remember how those crazy continental cousins all laughed like garglebuckets at *The Gods Must Be Crazy*.

An even more improbable candidate for arthouse status was Abel Ferrara's sf, and widescreen, début *Body Snatchers*, the high-sleaze impresario's least sleazy and most openly commercial picture ever – pulled last autumn from a scheduled cinema release to go straight to video, then reprieved after all with a limited "arthouse" run (at the NFT, no less) before it finally hits the shelves in the spring. It's peculiarly ironic that while Ferrara's small and video-friendly *Bad Lieutenant* is still only allowed to be seen on the big screen, the florid Cinemascope showmanship of *Body Snatchers* is condemned to squat in a box a few inches high; especially when Ferrara's is certainly the most thoughtful, and for better or worse the most self-conscious, of the film versions of Jack Finney's original potboiler, which over the decades have transcended their fairly inane and dated premise to assemble into a remarkable history of the Other in American popular consciousness. Though all three versions have clung reliably to the same rather tired assurances (individualism good, conformity bad, hysterical emotion pure and noble and human and the lack of it a certain mark of a HIDEOUS POD THING), loony paranoia has an undeniably limited shelflife; and while all three agree that They get you when you sleep, both the

seventies and nineties remakes have inevitably had to recognize that fashions change considerably as to who the They are. And so, with an extremely careful eye on the 1956 and, especially, the 1978 version, Ferrara's scenarists (including those cherished sf B-vets Larry Cohen and Stuart Gordon) have re-located the action from Siegel's smallville and Kaufman's metropolis to a splendidly creepy deep-south military base, where the 90s alien can be re-redefined as an ingenious and evocative marriage of the postnuclear stepfamily with the postnuclear military, all cleverly focalized through the troubled eyes of Gabrielle Anwar's adolescent heroine. This gives the update two heavy allegories to play off one another: one political, with the conspiracy of faceless infiltration reclothed as the post-Bush Pentagon and CIA; and the other personal, with first stepmother, then father, and finally sibling alienated in strict kinship order, leaving the troubled teen to make her rite de passage escape into the arms of the big dark hunk with the enormous chopper.

This all sounds, and I suppose is, appallingly laboured and knowing. Yet in practice, both strands of the fable are handled with surprising sensitivity and atmosphere – with haunting performances from Anwar herself (a striking juve ringer for Ferrara favourite Zoe Tamerlis) and from Meg Tilly as the zombified stepmother, and with individual set pieces and images unmatched by anything in the earlier versions (the no-fun-ever bar from hell where only pod people drink; Anwar's kid brother, newly arrived at nursery school, holding up the one crayon-painting in class that isn't an identical blood-coloured study in queasy visceral

tangles; the long moment after Anwar shoots her suspect father as we wait to see if she was right; the child falling from the fleeing copter in the Kaufman point'n'scream alarm pose.) And though less effective as a straight suspense exercise than the seventies remake (if only because it's so much shorter), *Body Snatchers* does score a number of good new plot mindgames of its own – making more, for instance, of the aliens' own paranoia over human infiltration, and in one particularly inspired headtwister putting the "They can be fooled" tip into the mouth of one of the pod people themselves.

This being Ferrara, it goes almost without saying that the dialogue isn't always up to the story's ambitions ("Do whatever the hell you have to do to extradite his departure"), and that the movie is also at times pretty luridly overacted (especially Forest Whitaker's ProPlus-popping doctor) and quite grotesquely overdirected (why on earth is Whitaker's key monologue shot from that ridiculous angle?); while the ending in particular is regrettably abrupt and awkward, and little helped by the perfunctory voice-over – unfortunate in a *Body Snatchers* picture, where endings are very important indeed. But it's pleasing to look back, in our artless age, on the way the *Body Snatchers* have managed to traversed the whole circuit from culty B-pic through mainstream studio blockbuster to that distinctively 90s twiglet zone between arthouse chic and video-premiere tack where Ferrara's films are so happily at home. And if the pod people, as it's tempting to read, are Hollywood, it's the guerrillas who get to dump their load of heavy ordnance at the end.

(Nick Lowe)

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# Two Dollars

## George Jenner

Every afternoon at the same time Morris waited on platform 3 at Redfern Station for a train to take him to the North Shore, to his home among Sydney's leafy affluence where he still lived with his patient parents, comfortably fallen English descendants living in suburbs like Turramurra and Warrawee – named for the long dead aborigines. Morris's parents had watched him through his first degree, applauded his honours, and now they waited expectantly as the finish line of his doctorate approached; and today, thought Morris, was the day of the finish of the end.

Late that afternoon he had set his computer running on what he was sure was the final analysis of his data; it would run all night and the next morning he would know the answer and could write the conclusion to his dissertation. He was so sure of himself that he slammed his office door in triumph, marched to the station singing, then sat on his bench reading a novel instead of looking for bugs in computer printouts as he usually did. He even said "hello" to the surprised little man who made the station announcements: "The trenna leave platform 3 goes to Hornsby via North Sinny. Firssop Central, then alla stations to Hornsby via North Sinny."

Through the platform speakers it was unintelligible, but Morris had been listening to the Mediterranean mumble for the eight years that he had been commuting, and though he had seen the platform master nearly every day, this was the first day that Morris had dared voice his scorn so openly. He only said "hello", but then he amused himself with the thought of spitting on the tracks, but that would be going too far so he sat with his head in his book, thinking, "I ought to tell him I'll have finished my project tomorrow. God, I am so brilliant!" But Morris was only comfortable with languages and not their speakers, so he left the Italian man alone, and went home to his mother, who had invited a friend for dinner – despite the fact his father was away on business.

"Someone asked about you the other day," said Mum.

"At tennis?"

She ignored the familiar sarcasm. "Who was it now?" she wondered, as she scratched her head, carefully maintaining the coiffure. "Oh, I can't remember but they wonder if you are finished."

Morris grinned. "You can tell them," he said, "I'll have the answer tomorrow."

Mum's friend was a lawyer, full of the knowledge of English.

"You're in linguistics," he stated flatly, as if starting a cross examination knowing already what he wanted to know and not remotely interested.

"More applied mathematics than linguistics," said Morris, and began to explain his life before his mother could stop him. She poured some wine and let Morris speak, knowing from experience that it was best to let it be over with quickly. She found this the only way to live with her eccentric son, so happy to work without a career.

Morris began his explanation. "In 1786 – what's that 211 years ago? An Englishman, Sir William Jones, showed that Sanskrit, Latin and Greek had a common source language that had probably disappeared. We call that Indo-European, the mother language of most of our modern European languages."

"And Indian," helped the lawyer.

"Quite. We can make a family tree with those other languages as the children – the branches from Indo-European. Now I am working on a mathematical method of constructing that tree; of genetic classification of languages, or glottochronology. I've taken Sankoff's fully parametrized lexicostatistics – based on the Swadesh method – and added more parameters." Morris paused to see if the lawyer caught his joke. Their guest was reading the wine-bottle label, but looked up anyway, trying to give his "no more questions, Your Honour" look.

"Is it good for anything?" he asked; to show too much boredom might offend the kid's mother.

"Not much. Really just to date the emergence of languages. For example, from the Romance group I can tell you that Spanish diverged from Portuguese by the 11th century, and from the German group that English diverged from an old North Sea dialect of German in the year 253."

The lawyer raised an objection. "Before the Angles invaded England?"

Morris was annoyed. People were always introducing history into his mathematics. He said, "well there was obviously some divergence before the invasion of England. Anyway, I can make you a family tree of any such group of related languages – and it's possible that they are all related in some way. Now the languages I work on..."

His mother interrupted. "So you say you'll be finished this week, darling?"

Morris jumped up, almost in triumph, almost losing his glasses into his gravy. "Mother, even as we speak the computer is doing the final analysis. Tomorrow morning I shall be finished. Four years work finished, justified and vindicated."

Mum was genuinely startled, and momentarily dumb. Composure floated around the candles but returned home fairly quickly, however, like pigeons scattered by a well thrown loaf of bread.

"That's nice dear," said Mum. "Now I'm afraid we don't have anything for dessert." She smiled demurely at Morris and her guest. "Coffee?" she asked.

**M**orris hardly slept that night, worried about his computer. Were his statistics correct? Was the algorithm correct? It worked on small groups of languages, but there were 205 now. Were his assumptions, of which there were uncomfortably many, correct? And what about the data, those thousands of words collected by other people – could he trust them? He tossed and tossed again, worried about the method and the outcome, never giving a thought to its meaning, that is to any significance of the answer other than its absolute value. To him language was an abstract world of mathematical games, and though he spent his life trying to pull uncertainty from the reluctant fuzzy glue of society and its games, he would have thought it impure to give meaning to his answers, obsessed and justified as he was by the method.

In the morning he left to catch his usual train. He stuck his head in his newspaper, but his mind was excited and reeling with the possibilities of the day, and he simply stared at headlines. On the station platform he always sat on the same seat, so he could get on the same train at the same carriage, and he tried to read the paper, to become engrossed, to obscure the world. This was usually a quiet time for Morris because commuting is uneventful and punctuated only by the sounds of passing of trains, their concomitant whistles and irrelevant announcements, but today he was interrupted in his reverie. Walking along the platform towards him were three aborigines, two young teenage boys who wore neat sporting clothes and an older Koori, skinny, dishevelled and very drunk despite the early hour. They were talking rather loudly and caused Morris to look up from his paper, and he saw peripherally that the commuter next to him had got up and moved to look at the time-table on the wall at the other end of the platform. But it was too late for Morris to be similarly indiscreet, for the Kooris were near him, and would see that he was running from them.

Morris hoped passionately that they would keep moving past him, and indeed the older Koori did keep wobbling his way up the platform, but soon returned, walking in circles. The two teenagers had stopped at the edge of the platform near Morris, and while one of them spat on the tracks the other turned to look directly at Morris who momentarily froze, for he was generally scared of poor people and genuinely terrified of poor black people. Because he was unaware of this, he was also unaware of the irony of it. Morris, you see, knew more about Australian Aboriginal languages than any person alive, yet he knew no black

people. His was an academic world – the world of his dissertation on the mathematical determination of the origins of Aboriginal language – and it never occurred to him as desirable to connect the languages, the words, the emotions they might have expressed, with living beings. He was like an astronomer gazing at stars that float parsecs beyond reach, never thinking that the objects of his study could be touched; never, in even his digital dreams, imagining that they could share common orbits.

He listened now to the English of the young boys, and though it was obviously inflected with their aboriginality Morris could not determine the inflection. He listened to the old man who mixed aboriginal words with his pissed admonitions to the boys, but he could place none of them. It was strange to hear an aboriginal language in the city, and almost unknown in these leafy white suburbs – despite the suburbs' aboriginal names. The old man must have come from far away. All the local blacks were killed long ago by smallpox and darts, both poisoned and verbal; and Morris did not know of any native language speakers living in the city; yet the native language piqued his interest, tweaked his ears, so he listened, and he understood nothing.

Morris eavesdropped on the unconcerned old man, but he found only frustration. In his office, his computer, his head, he had word lists for 205 aboriginal languages, yet he knew them only by their phonetic representation on paper. He could no sooner recognize them in speech than most people could admit to bigotry, for his knowledge was of cognates, not conversation. In his computer Morris was growing a family tree of aboriginal languages by assessing the closeness of genetically related languages, and from that closeness he could tell when the languages separated in time. By doing this for the languages all across the continent – connecting Guugu-Yimidhirr of the northern jungle to Maliyara of the western desert – Morris would determine the date that aborigines first entered Australia, for it is assumed that they came across the land bridge from what we call New Guinea, when the sea was lower.

Morris stared at the old man, who was now alone but still talking. He thought, "how strange. I could know this man through his words. I have studied his language as if it were Latin, Greek or Sanskrit, yet he is not dead. I have studied his language to determine his birth, assuming that he was already dead. I have studied the trade routes and songlines of his ancestors – I know the tribes with whom he communicates, with whom he shares vocabulary; I know everything that could have influenced his language, don't I? All these can be reduced to mathematical coefficients, can't they?" A picture of Australia, all dry as if in desert, came into his head, and onto it he superimposed his glottochronological method, a huge equation which was, as already noted, more than fully parametrized. And his parameters were so complete by the grace of the thousands of workers who had collated the information he needed – the people who went out and spoke to the aborigines, recorded their languages and maybe played a little with their children. Morris saw his variables and phonetic alphabet twisting together, his Greek symbols melting and merging with the desert, the whirring silicon of his

computer infected by inflating viruses that converted it back to desert sand.

**H**e snapped to, forgetting his algorithm, for he sensed that the black man was staring at him. Morris furiously pretended to read, but he was flushed and angry at the interruption of his routine and, though he did not yet suspect it, his life. The black man turned away, but Morris found it impossible to read his paper. He was impelled to watch and listen to the aborigines, and even with his head down he could see and hear all.

One of the teenagers stayed where he was and continued to spit on the tracks as if he was practicing his precision. The other approached the man next to Morris and sat down on the bench between them, less than a metre from Morris, who quivered slightly and pretended to read even more intensely, trying to make his face say "I haven't seen you and therefore you are not allowed to disturb me," as a child in class hides ignorance or neglected homework with silence and hope.

The teenage boy said to Morris's neighbour, "I was wonderin' if you could give us two dollars." Unhesitatingly the man, who looked perfectly respectable, fished around in his trouser pocket and produced two coins.

"Here's four," he said. The boy's eyes lit up at this unexpected beneficence.

"Hey, Johnno," he cried to his friend who was still spitting on the rails, "this man gave us four dollars."

This interested Johnno who left his duty at the edge of the platform to join them and see for himself what the four dollars looked like. He sat on the other side of the man from his brother, and held out his hand to receive the coins.

"Jeez, not many people give us four dollars," he said, and he took the man's hand and shook it. His brother asked, "What's yer name; mate? Where ya from? We're from Newcastle. Me an' Kev an' Roger over there are goin' to North Sydney," he said pointing to the older man who was staggering aimlessly along the platform.

"Wow, four dollars. Not many give us four dollars," he repeated, shaking his head in disbelief and shaking the man's hand once more in gratitude.

Morris's initial response to this exchange was incredulity at the euphoric reaction to such a small amount of money. Four dollars would not buy a meal, yet for these boongs it bought an immediate friend. Morris was not uncharitable, he just thought that four dollars was too small an amount to excite anyone but the stupid, but the three people beside him were now talking happily, almost intimately, as if they were brothers – and one of them was of his own kin and kind! But then something grabbed his guts, and almost as suddenly as his contempt for their gratitude had arisen he was seized by confusion about his contempt, and he squirmed behind his newspaper.

He looked up to see that the older Koori had wandered back to stand in front of him. "Hey, mate," said the Koori, but there was no response from Morris. "Hey, mate," he said again, and reluctantly Morris looked up from his paper to see the skinny old man swaying as if a breeze from a passing train rocked him gently. But there was no breeze to blow away the stale stench of booze.

"Can ya give us two dollars?" he asked.

Morris remained quiet but he took a hand from his paper and slipped it into his pocket, as if to look for some coins. "What did you say?"

"I was wonderin' if you could give us two dollars." Morris remained silent for a moment; he fingered the two dollar coin in his pocket, gently caressing the embossed queen's head on its reverse as he considered giving it to the Koori who stood in front of him swaying slowly in his stupor. In this hiatus the Koori was momentarily distracted, and he said, "best place in the world, Australia. Everyone comes here. Best place in the world."

"Yes it is," agreed Morris, and he thought "piss off, leave me alone," and he tried to squeeze his thoughts through clenched teeth as if mixing them with the atmosphere would make them understood by the drunk.

"Give us two dollars, would ya?"

"I haven't got any money," said Morris.

"C'mon. Just two dollars."

Morris's embarrassment was growing, and he wished his train would arrive and break up this scene for him.

"I haven't got two dollars, mate," he said. "Honest. If I had two dollars I'd give it to you."

"Best place in the world."

"Yes, I agree with you."

"Aborigines looked after it real good," said the Koori, punctuating his words with gasps of stale, boozy air breathed into Morris's face.

The stench made Morris recoil, and he said, "Yes, they did a very good job. They looked after it real good for 40,000 years." For the moment he had forgotten that later in the morning he would be able to give a more accurate assessment based on the genetic classification of their languages. Suddenly the old man began to giggle.

He said, "forty thousand years! Have you ever heard so much white fellas bullshit?"

"What?" asked Morris.

"What do they know? Forty thousand years, bullshit. We been here since we was dreamed."

Archaeological arguments with which he could contradict the man poured into Morris's head, but the Koori giggled again, exhaling the thoughts from Morris with his vapour breath. "You got nothin' at all?"

"What?" Morris was confused, temporarily lost in his scientific faith. What did this man want?

"Not even two dollars?"

"Oh, that. No. I'm sorry."

"Ya haven't even got two dollars?"

"I told you – no! Honest, I haven't got a cent." But the skinny black man just stood there, silent and swaying until one of the young boys came over and grabbed him by the elbow, both to steady him and turn him away.

He said, "hey, Roger, come here. This guy gave us four dollars. Come and meet him." And they introduced the pissed Roger to the man who had given them four dollars. Roger shook the hand of the man, who seemed even more bemused by this attention. They laughed together for a moment, enjoying the meeting, but they were interrupted at last by the arrival of the train which rolled in and opened its doors for them with a pneumatic sigh almost as loud as that

from Morris who saw his escape – a hope quickly dashed by the crowds in the train. He arose and watched as the aborigines once more thanked the man for his four dollars before they all boarded the train, squeezing between standing commuters, grabbing what they could for stability.

Morris shut his paper with one hand. His other hand was still in his pocket where, on the two-dollar coin, the index finger still stroked the profile of Her Majesty the Queen, her crown and her jewels. Because the train was so crowded, Morris reluctantly had to stand next to the old drunk for the 20-minute ride to North Sydney where he and his young friends would alight. During that time the old man said nothing, but gripped the swaying pole tightly in his drunken stupor and stared at Morris continually. He was probably thinking nothing, but every time Morris accidentally glanced at him, he saw "white fellas bullshit" tattooed on his forehead, and he quickly turned away, wishing the old man would go away and die, or at least close his eyes, or stare somewhere else.

**F**inally the old man alighted at North Sydney with the two boys, their laughter confusing the suited bankers who tried to avoid them on the station steps. The train was emptier now; Morris found a seat and slumped, confused himself, but not knowing why. He was tired and irritated, and annoyed to be so on the day of his triumph. He checked the time. He knew the computer would have finished the calculation. He sighed, grateful for the hardness of his computer, impassively digital and unaffected by spirituality. But is that so true? He wondered if the computer could remain unaffected by the eyes of the pissed off old man. He saw himself now reading the answer off the screen, and instead of saying the expected 40,000 years, it said "Error: too much white fellas bullshit." Conclusion: Australian aboriginal languages did not diverge from one common source – they were created independently during the time of ...well during the time we have translated into English as "The Dreaming."

Morris shook his head and sat up. He had arrived at Redfern Station, so he left the train. He took longer than usual to walk to his office for, although he did not wander from his everyday path, he walked slowly, trudging through the aboriginal quarter of town, a place named for an English doctor, realizing that he was walking past the faces of the ancestors of his study, faces who for him had previously been no more than another city-life backdrop.

In his office he sat, eyes closed and feeling ridiculous for his fears, and turned on the computer monitor. It glowed quickly and Morris scrolled to the top of the family tree it had grown overnight, creating a seed from the leaves he had fed it. He tried to match the impassivity of the computer which said simply, at the top of the tree, "43258": that is the languages began to diverge forty-three thousand two hundred and fifty-eight years ago. A sensible and reasonable answer in all respects. A success – everything had worked. He should have felt triumphant, for that number had taken his entire educational life, child and adult, to find. But he felt nothing.

He turned off the computer, then stood and put his hands in his pockets where he felt the two-dollar

coin. Absently he stroked it with his fingers, groping the queen on the reverse, and her playmate on the obverse. On the obverse of the Australian two-dollar coin there is a native tribal elder who carries his proud initiation scars on his chest. He is anonymous like the platypus on the twenty-cent coin and the lyre bird on the ten, and he peers outwards; the jewelled Southern Cross is depicted there, too – perhaps for his crown. So in his pocket Morris traced the pectoral scarification of the tribal elder with his sharp thumb nail, harshly gouging deeper into the golden chest, and such was the force of his thumb that the bejewelled profile of Elizabeth II was impressed into the soft skin of his index finger. All the while the Southern Cross continued to watch over the tribal elder; it watched uncaring in the dark pocket, unconcerned that beneath the constellation was depicted "two dollars" in bold, unconfusing, unambiguous English letters.

Morris stood thus silently staring out his window. He was looking south, to the same point marked by the constellated stars, those stars of the Southern Cross which were ignorantly continuing to move with their proper motion, forever changing until ultimately they would destroy their own cross, not knowing that for stars forgiveness is irrelevant, and not worth two dollars.

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**George Jenner** is a new writer of Australian background who currently lives in Luxembourg. The above is his first-ever contribution to an sf magazine, though he has had one mainstream short story published elsewhere.

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# Wrist Voodoo

## Charles Platt



I'm going to try very hard not to sound like a boring hypochondriac as I tell you the story of an affliction that took six months out of my writing life and discouraged me from contributing columns to *Interzone*, three years ago. My disability was, in a sense, futuristic: it seemed to be linked with computer technology. And yet, ultimately, it turned out to have more in common with primitive practices such as shamanism or voodoo.

The condition I'm talking about is widely referred to as repetitive strain injury, or RSI. Really, there's nothing new about it. For decades, it has afflicted workers doing repetitive manual tasks on assembly lines, people wielding scissors in hairdressing salons, and even dental hygienists scraping plaque from people's teeth. But then it started afflicting journalists, secretaries, and writers who use computer keyboards; and suddenly RSI was recast as an indictment of "inhuman" computer technology.

I wasn't particularly concerned about it myself, because I had set up my keyboard and monitor to minimize all forms of stress. When I wrote, I worked for long spells of twelve or 14 hours, taking time only to bring food over to my desk so that I could continue writing while I ate. And I never experienced the slightest ache or pain in my wrists, arms, back, or shoulders.

Then, without warning, my situation changed. Coincidentally (or so it seemed), I had been told about RSI by a friend of mine who had just come down with it herself. She had described her symptoms in vivid detail; and two weeks later, with growing disbelief, I felt it

happening to me. First there were random tingling sensations in my wrists and fingers, which went away when I shook my hands. Then there were stabbing pains that were much more persistent. Within a few days, it reached the point where I was unable to press a single key without feeling discomfort that quickly escalated to pain.

In engineering terms, this made no sense. The average computer keyboard requires fingertip pressure somewhere between two and three ounces. My hands, wrists, and arms had been strengthened by years of carpentry and home repairs. Also, I was in the habit of doing twenty chin-ups a day, gripping a bar that I had installed at head height across my doorway. Since my wrists were accustomed to taking a strain of around sixty pounds each, how could it possibly bother them to exert a couple of ounces?

But it did bother them, and I found myself starting to panic. I was under contract to write three novels within the next six months. And so, I tried to "work through" the condition. Naturally, this made it significantly worse.

I quit writing and started reading – about RSI. The physiology turned out to be simple enough: when you curl your fingers, the force that makes this happen is exerted by a muscle in your fore arm which pulls tendons that run through your wrist, into your hand. Under certain conditions, these tendons may become inflamed, which causes them to swell up. This creates friction between them as they slide to and fro, especially where they travel through a narrow sheath in the

wrist itself. This sheath is known as the carpal tunnel; hence "carpal tunnel syndrome," which is one specific variant of RSI.

Unfortunately, the carpal tunnel serves a dual function: it also houses some important nerves. When the tendons swell, they can press on the nerves, causing tingling sensations and pain. If you insist on continuing the abuse for long enough, you may actually inflict permanent damage – not only on sensory nerves, but on motor nerves which control small movements of your hands.

But why should the tendons swell up in the first place? What are those "certain conditions" which make it happen? I hadn't varied my work habits in any way. I had done nothing out of the ordinary, except listen to my friend telling me how RSI had happened to her. Could that have affected me? Was my pain illusory? What was the real explanation?

As I started visiting doctors and physical therapists, I found no shortage of possibilities. I was told that "computers encourage people to type faster." I was informed that "on a typewriter, you have to pause to press the return key at the end of each line. On a computer keyboard, you don't get that little break from the monotony." I also heard that "people work for longer periods on computers, without taking a rest."

Every theory, without exception, blamed the keyboard or the computer. Yes, it was this new-fangled technology causing all the trouble, no doubt about that!

I pointed out that I have always typed at my current speed, and I pause frequently to think when I'm writing (which provides a longer

break than would occur by pressing a return key), and I have always worked for long, unbroken periods, even when I used to use a manual typewriter that exerted far more strain on my wrists.

Also, I started using microcomputers back in 1979. My first year with a microcomputer was spent in a state of virtual addiction, writing programs, remaining at the keyboard sometimes for 24 hours at a stretch. So why hadn't I been afflicted with RSI then?

Well, I was told, age can be a factor. Or it can be progressive, suddenly crossing a threshold point and flaring up without warning.

But these theories weren't really theories at all. They were suppositions; attempts to explain things after the fact. When I started probing, I found that no one had done any clinical research, sitting people in different positions in front of different kinds of keyboards and getting them to type for ten hours a day. No one could even explain the physical mechanism of RSI – why a strong tendon should be affected by such a tiny load. In fact, some old-fashioned doctors refused to believe that RSI could occur in the way it was supposed to.

I went to physical therapists, who had no idea how to treat it but were quite happy to try. Their cheerful hit-and-miss approach made the inflammation considerably worse.

I tried a nerve test, in which needles were inserted, voltage was applied, and the twitchings of my arm certified that there was nothing, in fact, wrong with my nerves.

My neighbour, a chiropractor, was sure he could fix RSI with homeopathic remedies. My parents recommended the Alexander Technique, a form of relaxation therapy. I was also advised to try hypnotism and acupuncture. Meanwhile, my friend who had contracted RSI before me was obtaining some relief (she said) by holding her wrists over a special candle which had been prescribed by an old man in Chinatown, who spoke no English but, when she told him "repetitive strain injury," somehow seemed to understand.

I preferred conventional medicine, so I went to a doctor who was

one of the nation's few bona-fide RSI specialists, having treated hundreds of cases. But even he was evasive when I tried to pin him down on its exact mechanism. He told me to change my work habits and be patient. In due course it should get better, but, he said authoritatively, I would never be able to use a keyboard with the same freedom that I had known in the past.

For most of my life, writing had been an emotional outlet, even when I was merely corresponding with friends. I didn't know how to readjust to life without self expression.

So, I journeyed to Connecticut to visit a man who sold state-of-the-art voice-recognition systems with a 20,000 word vocabulary. The cost of the hardware and the software combined was \$8,000, which almost seemed worth it till I saw how slowly the operator had to speak and how many words the system misinterpreted.

I tried dictating into a tape recorder, and became maddened by the inability to "see" what I had just said.

I tried writing by hand, which was intolerably slow compared with my usual typing speed.

I tried dictating the text to a human computer operator, which worked well but bogged down when I had to describe cursor-key movement and edits, line by line.

Meanwhile, I was attacking the condition with wrist splints, a custom-moulded arm brace, cold packs, hot packs, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, muscle relaxants, and tranquillizers.

Ultimately, the two things that made a difference were the obvious ones: supporting the elbows on arm rests while typing, and resting the wrists on a soft pad in front of the keyboard. Both of these measures were intended to diminish stress on the tendons by reducing muscle tension. My RSI "specialist" was also able to give me some exercises which seemed to work, though I could never figure out why.

And gradually, over a period of months, the condition did improve. Today, contrary to predictions, I am able to type as much as I like – up to 10,000 words a day, if I need to. I can also do all the things that were impossible while

my wrists were bad. I can drive a car, carry shopping bags, and grab the stainless steel pole on a bus to stop myself from falling over.

But still, even now, after nearly four years, I feel some small physical side effects when I use a keyboard. My hands get hot and my fingers tingle after a few hours of typing. Why? I have no idea.

Around the time when my condition first started to improve, I decided to write a book on the subject. My specialist doctor agreed to a fifty-fifty collaboration, so I drafted an outline and a sample chapter, which he approved. I showed this text to my wife, who read it carefully – and a few days later, she started complaining of minor wrist pain.

Well, maybe that was just a coincidence. But then I sent the text to my literary agent, and he, too, reported that within a few days, his wrists started to hurt.

Could RSI be caused partly by suggestion? It sounded fanciful, but I saw no other explanation, especially when I considered the pattern of RSI among journalists. In news rooms, the cases always seem to occur in clusters. Either no one gets it, or a score of people become afflicted in quick succession. Obviously, this implies some form of transmission, and since it isn't an infectious or contagious disease, it has to be a matter of suggestion.

I went back to my specialist doctor (who was now my co-author) and I said that so far as I could see, RSI must have a significant psychological component. Moreover, I could imagine a mechanism that would explain this. You hear a friend describe symptoms, which makes you imagine being afflicted with the condition yourself. This makes you worried. You imagine losing your job, or being unable to fulfil a book contract – and if you're a tense person (as most extreme RSI sufferers seem to be), that makes your muscles clench up, consciously or unconsciously. This imposes extra stress on the tendons. Other muscles perhaps squeeze the carpal tunnel itself. Friction is induced, creating bona-fide physical symptoms – which naturally make you even more worried, creating more tension, creating more pain, in a neat vicious circle.

This kind of pattern is not very

different from the mechanism of voodoo, which works because the victim believes it will work. But the specialist refused to accept the idea. He insisted that RSI is fundamentally caused by physical factors: the height of the chair, the habits of the typist, the tactile feel of the keyboard. I think he wanted to position himself as a consultant on keyboard and furniture design. He was already advising a group of patients who were suing the manufacturer of a brand of keyboard which, they claimed, had caused their condition at a local newspaper.

From his point of view, it made much better sense for me to function merely as a writer putting his ideas into words, not as an amateur researcher challenging him with half-baked ideas of my own. So, I decided not to write that book about RSI, and I'm glad I made that decision, because I still do believe that RSI can be exacerbated by suggestion, and I think my book could have hurt many more people than it would have helped.

In a sense, this has been a science-fiction story. A futuristic device (the word processor) is

introduced. Millions of people start using it, and they develop a crippling, mysterious disorder. No one can figure out how it spreads. Like an alien virus, it seems to come from nowhere, yet it's everywhere.

In a traditional Heinlein-style narrative, after a bunch of bungling bureaucrats have had a chance to make the situation worse, a Competent Man should figure out an ingenious solution. Then there'd be a satisfying resolution and a sense of catharsis at the end.

Well, this tells us something about science fiction's unrealistic outlook on technology. In the real world, problems aren't nearly so neat and tidy, and one Competent Man doesn't come up with The Answer. The best he can hope to do, as I did, is quibble with the experts, muddle through, and develop an unprovable theory. When all is said and done, the problem isn't really "solved" at all.

Now let me look ahead a little. The voice-recognition system that I saw demonstrated has been improved and

dramatically reduced in price. It was recently announced for just \$600.

Clearly, there's a trend here. Within a decade, none of us should need to use keyboards at all – so long as our work requires a relatively limited vocabulary of, say, 20,000 words. At that time, RSI will be a thing of the past.

The downside of this is that speech recognition technology will actually discourage people from using unusual words or terms. (Watch out, John Clute!) And this, in turn, can affect the way we think.

I remember a voyage that I took years ago on a freighter where the crew spoke very limited English. After ten days of consciously simplifying my speech, I found that even my thoughts were forming themselves in simpler sentences.

In a similar fashion, I think speech-recognition technology could render us, in a sense, stupid. But that's a different science-fiction story – one which I may be able to speak into my computer in ten years' time, assuming I still have the necessary words to do so.

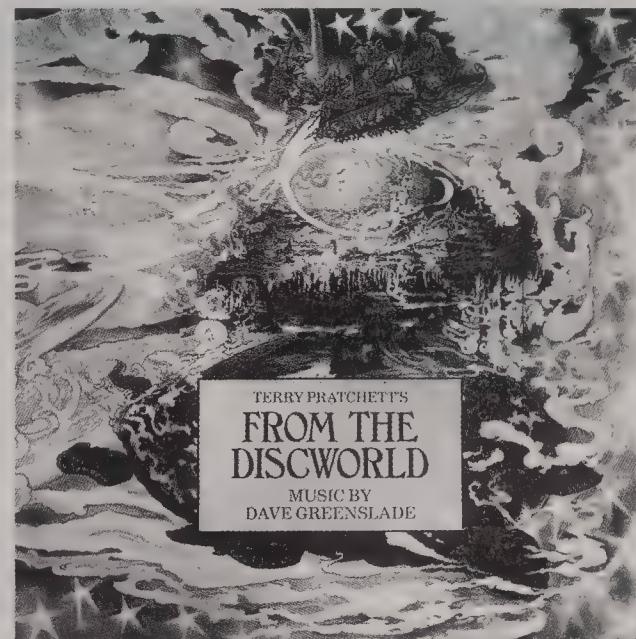
## WITCHES, GODS, PYRAMIDS, STICKS, BUCKETS, KNOBS, WIZARDS, A TURTLE AND DEATH....

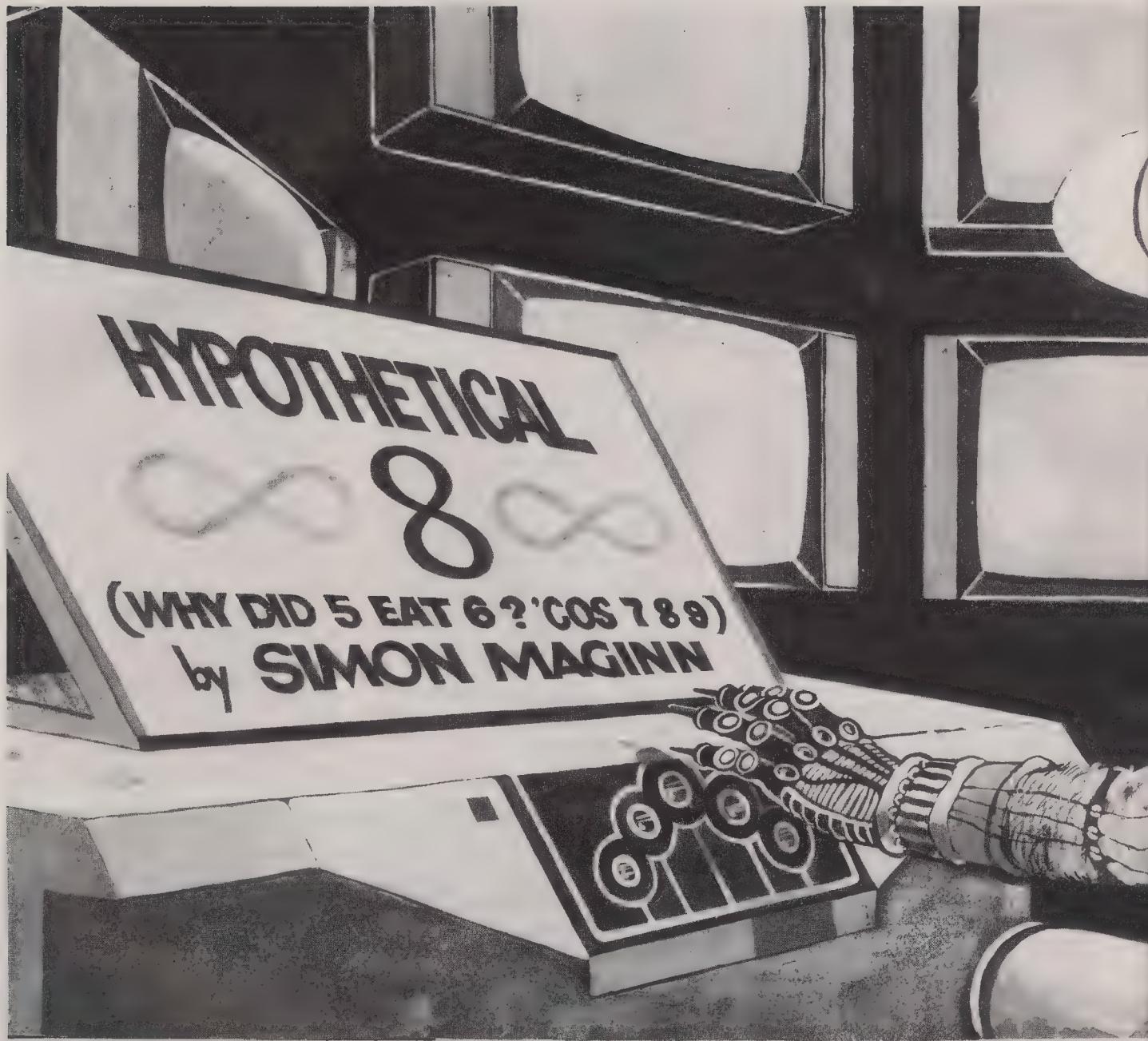
### THEY'RE ALL IN....

AN ALBUM OF MUSIC  
BY DAVE GREENSLADE

INSPIRED BY  
TERRY PRATCHETT'S  
DISCWORLD NOVELS

OUT NOW  
ON CD & CASSETTE



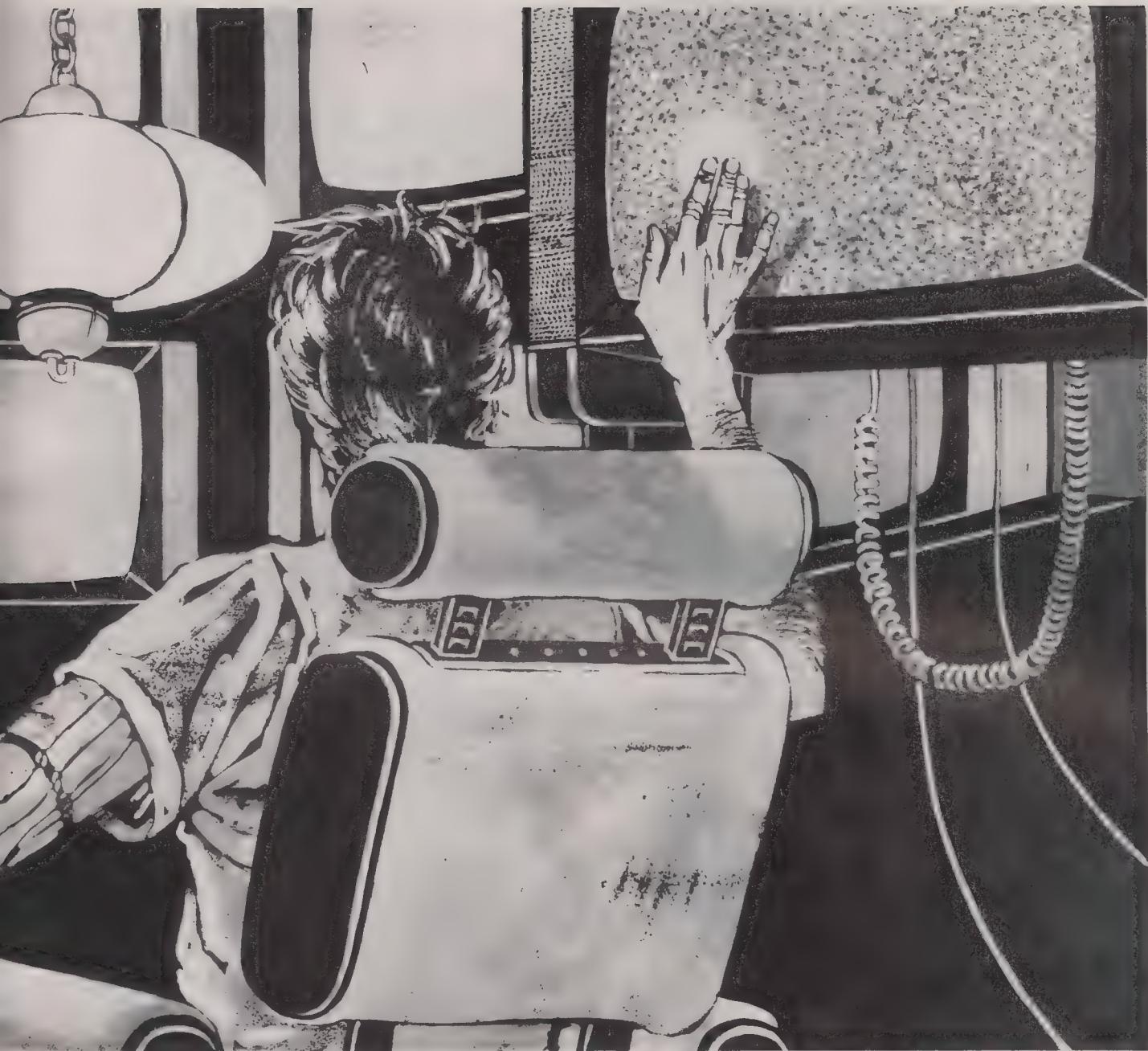


**F**irst there is a dot. A mathematical notion, an abstract, location without dimension, potentiality. The dot grows, divides, flickers: becomes, but only as a step to becoming something else, means without end.

Xerxes tries not to concentrate, aims without aiming. He grimaces: third-hand, second-rate Zen the whole routine. The yes/nos effervesce in his mind, a brilliant canopy of them, trails from a firework rocket. The dot mutates, responding millions of times a second to the yes/nos. Evolving, becoming an image. His eye moves, he is thinking: "The television you're watching is probably Hypothetical," as the ad campaign puts it. The image fractures, pixels skittering over the screen at the distraction. Mother. Initiated, almost formed, disintegrated, all in less than a second. The first moment is the hardest, once you're up you're flying.

He drinks beer, letting the machine go to Get and Random. It hums for a moment, then the screen is full of some kind of low-grade porn, a fist working a huge, dangling, semi-erect cock. The channel is up in the

12 billions, which could of course mean anything, but is at least far enough away from the neat and tidy, a-place-for-everything-and-everything-in-its-place Virtual channels which thin out after one and a half billion. Pastiche of the old Virtual style can be found just about anywhere, but above two you're generally safe, apart from the occasional joke transmission, art-students being tedious, well, being art students really. Boring. The hand works more slowly, moves away, and the cock fills the screen, presumably at someone's optimum degree of tumescence. Another hand appears, gloved, and cups the balls. Tilt. The machine searches again, finds a 117-digit number beginning with five, and there is a moon shining on the waves, a beach, dogs splashing and barking. A man throws pebbles into the moonlit water, the dogs chase. From the ridiculous to the sublime. Xerxes settles in, unclips the headpiece, watches, unaware that the channel number has been logged by Logic police and that there is something really rather odd about the pictures he's receiving. Very odd indeed.



**L**ong before the eight-billion band was closed down, people were developing the syndrome which has come to be called Perault's, the inability to transmit or receive in any recognizably human manner. Much moral panic, a new global pandemic to get worked up about. But Perault's Syndrome has been in existence far longer than its name, and the transmissions were at first labelled New Form by those whose business it was to study such things. Us."

He smiled and surveyed the half-empty hall. Many of the delegates to the "Grammar and Translateral Form in Perault's Mosaics: 12th Symposium" seemed to have got lost on their way back from lunch.

"Aficionados thought they were getting a new slant, political or mystical or merely formal, according to the bent of the receiver. By a logic that is still under investigation, channel assignments all fell into the eighth-billion band, and there was much talk for a while of 'eightness': much play on the similarity between the figure 8 and ∞. I recall a paper in this very hall entitled 'Infinity Tilted.' A new Infinite Age.

When it became clear that eightness was indeed new, but a disorder rather than a format, the reaction was immediate. Social upheaval on a scale not seen since the Black Death; millions incarcerated in hastily-built centres, blanket decommissioning of eight-band channels, and the rise of a new body of professionals – again, in part, us – who perhaps inevitably came to be called The Inquisition, alongside a resurgence in the old profession of hacking. Technically, no ten-digit channel beginning with eight can either be Sent or Got, but as this symposium demonstrates, the hackers and their clients are still very much in business.

"Perault (or the Anti-Christ, as the American Assembly of Healers in Christ prefer to call her) is a big belligerent woman, her transmissions climbing into major corporation sponsorship before the clampdown. She is now in a centre near Dagenham, her every gesture so hedged around with copyright and Morals injunctions that she is under 24-hour sedation, apart from her Inquisition sessions. Later in this conference, as you are aware, we hope to be able to witness such a session, with a live Hypothetical link.

I have been asked to remind delegates that special Morals conditions apply here, and delegates must, repeat must," (he accompanied the words with a small ironic shrug of the eyebrows) "have completed a Morals vetting interview in order to see this material.

"Colleagues, the earth used to be enveloped, like a yolk in its egg-white, by the ether, an undetectable substance of mysterious qualities. Well the ether is gone now, in its place a monstrous smog of transmissions, bouncing from satellite to satellite, deflected and refracted by space debris, becoming tangled and interwoven. With no limit as to number, and no means of erasure, the channels form a soup of information, cross-fertilizing, interacting in an infinite number of new combinations and permutations. Omni-nomial theorems have sprung up to accommodate this information weather, but the prophets and evangelists are probably nearer the mark – one day, soon, there is going to be a flood." He glanced to the wings – he was getting a wind-up signal.

"Where astronauts sailed, serene, lonely, in a sparkling black sea of innocent, empty space, now hangs an ever-tightening mesh of channels, with the as yet unproven – though of course theoretically necessary – 'cross-channel ferries' shuttling between them, neither data nor life but seemingly teleologic, with their cargos of image-freight dropped and picked up from channel to channel, shuffling, re-ordering.

"Eight-band channels, it would appear, have now developed clearly organized links, the integrity of each individual channel surrendered to a new ordering of the whole. The spark, it would seem, that triggered this new communicability was Bernice Perault, who is the subject of the next paper." He glanced again into the wings, then at his prompt screen. "I beg your pardon, our next speaker will in fact be delivering a paper entitled 'Protein chains and "cross-channel ferries" – towards a theory of information use in eight-band transmissions.' Colleagues, please welcome Ms Shirleen Dakota." He started the applause, and backed off stage.

**L**ogic, though a comparatively recent branch of police investigation, had already established itself as one of the most slow-moving, inefficient and bureaucratic branches of the service, as if its recent birth had brought it into the world fully endowed with all the worst features of its parents. It was, in many ways, a throwback to older, long abandoned methods of detection: a Logic Division operative ("think-squaddy," inevitably) would typically be found in front of a screen, assessing and sifting information. To the rest of the police force, reduced almost exclusively to bullying food criminals for information about their sources and bashing escaped (or suspected escaped, or just suspected) Perault Code detainees, the Think Squad was something of a joke, the kind of unit that you could be promoted sideways into by someone who didn't like your face, and never escape from, peopled by balding, impotent, fattish men and gangly, misfit young zealots. Aside from their everyday job of deriving logically rigorous functions to routine number violations, which often formed the whole of the state's case, they were also involved in major projects: the scrutiny of channel-

selection logs, in large sector-by-sector trenches, and the Holy Grail of the Logic section – the eight-band logic.

The 8band Division was unquestionably the SAS of Logic, and Cleaver had been working his way up the ladder for nearly 20 years now. Eight-band investigation required an unusual mixture of skills, far removed from the sedentary image that Logic had acquired. The ability to gather information from any source, be it the seediest food-dealer in the network of illicit manufacturers, analysts and distributors that thronged the unlicensed sectors of the night-time streets, or a dissident academic with a new theory. The ability to go, unarmed and without support, into the hard-to-let Housing Association developments and kick down doors in the middle of the night. The ability to go deep undercover among the most notorious enclaves in the most notorious Perault Camps, and to come out again, still transmitting level.

At 43, Denzil Cleaver had the physique and reflexes of an 18-year-old, coupled with the experience of nearly 20 years police work, and an analytical facility that had been honed in a thousand life-threatening situations. At 23 he'd had to derive a complex function from a series that his companion, who happened to be holding a sharpened screwdriver against his eyelid, called out to him in a crazed and alarming manner. Denzil had miscalculated a power, and was on the verge of getting a sign wrong, before he'd managed to distract his "informant's" attention by stabbing him in the stomach with a light-pencil. And it was with a similar feeling of excitement, a thrill in the stomach, that Cleaver now looked at his screen. There was something here, he could smell it.

**X**erxes sat, haggard in front of his screen. He hadn't left the house for six days; he hadn't eaten for three. Dismissed from the food shop because of major, multiple errors in market-divination, he was now completely broke, but even if he'd had the money the idea of going out and buying food struck him as impossibly grandiose. He had supplies for, maybe, 14-days, then that was it. With his knowledge of food-markets he could probably get by by peddling information to the backstreet market analysts, but in his present condition he couldn't have peddled a dead bird to a cat. After three days and nights of programming (odd programming, he felt, dimly) and watching (very odd watching, oh dear yes) he was in a condition which any Inquisitor would have recognized instantly: Hypertrophied Rhinencephalon Q-Stripe Autologous Engorgement Dysfunction; what the scum-news channels called data-shock. And he was about to Send.

A person in data-shock was, ipso facto, unfit to Send anything to anyone, though to do so could be considered a disorder rather than an offence, at least in some circles. But a data-shock Sender receiving his own transmissions; that was Paragraph Two, that was a dangerous feedback loop. The disorder in the Sends would become progressively amplified until the Send had taken on the characteristic nightmarish quality of a Perault transmission.

Xerxes fingered the control, his thumb stroking the Send button. He was nearly ready.

**T**he notion of a number-parasite has been in development for more than a decade now: many of you will remember the Memphis Symposium where Dr Mars first unveiled his paper on integer integrity and symbiosis. To complete absence of any interest whatsoever, as I'm sure I don't need to remind you!"

The audience laughed, then realized they'd been tricked – Dr Mars had committed suicide the following year.

"His original idea, that a number could be in fact simply one element in a mutually supporting pair or cluster, has now given way to an altogether less democratic, rosy-hued view of the interactions between meta-long numbers. We are now more likely to see number interactions as something of a battlefield.

"Number Parasitism has come to theoretical prominence of course primarily in the field of eight-logic, where it has recently been suggested in a number of papers that whatever logic assigned the original Perault transmissions to eight billion numbers has also found a method of disguising, or cloaking, the eightness of the channel by means of a 'host' channel number. Several means have been found, theoretically only I must stress, whereby an eight-number could become, as it were, enmeshed in the fabric of a longer, more complex number, which would both protect and transport it. But the theoretical problems, whilst enormous, are inconsiderable placed beside the questions it raises about the containment and arresting of the Perault phenomenon. For now, all we can safely say is that there may well be 'leakage' from the eight-band, and that it could turn up almost anywhere. We would appear, ladies and gentlemen, to be facing a new crisis."

Running-Bear Cottonseed paused for effect, ham that he was, and was momentarily distracted by a noise coming from the back of the hall. He squinted in the direction of the sound, but the lights were in his eyes and all he could see was glare. He continued his address, which was received with due courtesy and nothing more. To most of the assembled specialists, number-parasitism was equivalent to voodoo, it was simply not in their frame of reference.

He found a seat in the hall to listen to the next speaker, and soon wished he hadn't bothered; Luther Tishkopf, neurolinguist. A bland, self-satisfied, tedious little man, who spoke without the slightest trace of interest in his voice.

Running-Bear was not at all displeased that his blinker should go off at this moment; the neurolinguists seemed always to be speaking amidst the rank aroma of the terror of their experimental animals, which category had recently been extended to include "severely contaminated Perault hosts," or "people" as they were sometimes known. There was to be a paper later on in the afternoon entitled "Some Experimental Observations of Perault Patients and their Responses to Inimical Environmental Factors," factors such as electric shocks, starvation, extreme cold. He shuddered, and pushed his way along the row of neatly trousered and skirted legs, and left the hall with the word "per-cent" ringing in his ear.

The voice on the other end of the blink-line was known but not immediately placeable.



"Bear? It's Denzil. Denzil Cleaver. Hope I'm not dragging you away from anything hot."

"Denzil. It's been quite some time. Christ! How ya doing?"

"Usual. Look I need to talk to you, but I'll have to arrange a security line."

"Matters of grave import and almost unutterable delicacy huh?"

"You know me, Bear. I follow the rules. This has to do with Logic."

"You mean Logic the philosophical discipline or Logic the squalid cubicle on Floor 16 of New New Scotland Yard?"

"Listen, Bear, I hate to sound factual and prosy, but I haven't got a lot of time. You want a piece of ludicrously over-paid consultancy work or you don't?"

"Do. Do."

"All right. I'll blink you again in ten minutes. Don't go away. I need you."

"Flatterer."

**T**he secure blink-lines were housed in a badly air-conditioned office in the basement of the conference centre. Running-Bear loosened his tie and waited for the link-up.

"Bear? You see all right? You're a bit indistinct."

"So are you, Denzil. You always were."

"Someday when I've got nothing particular to do I'll laugh at one of your jokes. I've got a case here, John started Getting a channel with a number that came up red on the screen, with a note about previous involvement in a suspected Para Two incident. A farm."

Running-Bear threw up his hands. "No! Not that!"

"Someone has to take it seriously, Bear, or we would all of us be in a camp somewhere. Who'd be left to do the studying, go to the fancy conferences, all that? No more gravy, Bear. Think about it. So. This Para Two freak-mother suspected farm organizer has been known to take quite an interest in numbers."

"Ah. Those naughty little fellows."

"Yes. I'm blinking the number to you now. You see it?"

Running-Bear consulted the screen: he leaned back in his chair as the string unfolded, a great big horrible hairy long number, he thought, and folded his hands behind his head, contemplating it.

"Quite a specimen," he said. "This is on the street?"

"Unfortunately. I need you to tell me about it. I've done all my famous first-aid factoring and I'm coming up nothing. I was reading in a journal..."

"You were doing what in a what exactly?"

"Do me a favour. Logic police can read. I can't speak for the rest of them. Anyway, this was some fine, trendy piece of dogmeat about parasitism, antagonistic interaction: you know about that stuff?"

"For a fee I know about it. Actually I was only earlier today up on my hind legs gabbing off about this very thing. It's becoming a hot field. Lotsa funding."

"My number here: has it got a parasite?"

"How the hell do I know? I only just saw it."

"How long to find out?"

"Twenty-four hours."

"What? What takes so long?"

"Hey, Denzil, let's get real here. No-one knows for certain if there's any such thing. There are nasty, carp-ing, cavilling, dissenting voices saying the whole

deal's off on theoretical grounds. Not happy about teleology in their sums, basically, it would seem. They like their numbers pure and holy like the driven..."

"Bear, have you got any idea how much this line is costing my department? Will you shut the fuck up please? Call me when you know. Please."

"Charm-boy," said Running-Bear and hung up. He loaded the number and went to the library.

**P**art of Xerxes' mind was deeply outraged by what he was watching. It was a higher part.

The rest of Xerxes' mind took in the fragmentary, nonsensical, appalling pictures and stored them. Part of his mind struggled against the terror and alien coldness of the pyrotechnics battering against his eyes, struggled like a monster in a lake, about to be declared non-existent at any moment. But mostly, Xerxes' mind obediently, efficiently juggled and manipulated the hideous, hard pictures, managing them neatly, taking over a disused store-room down in the brainstem for their safekeeping. His pineal ticked tidily, filing and directing and shuffling like a card sharp, while the monster thrashed and raged in the black, bottomless water, flinging up great fountains of spray, which splashed harmlessly down.

**T**he speaker, an immense ugly woman in a purple dress like an ill-made and over-decorated tent, hesitated as a rustling towards the back of the auditorium grew into a fully fledged commotion; someone was standing, shouting, holding something up.

"...instead we will be concerned here..."

"Destroy the Data Devils! Destroy —"

The commotion-maker was holding a hastily unfolded strip of cotton sheet bearing the words:

AN END TO SYTSEMATIC CONTAMINATION

The S and T in "systematic" had been reversed, whether through negligence, by way of illustration of the problem, or because of systematic contamination, being unclear.

The enormous woman coughed and looked to the back where armed security apes were mustering themselves, waiting for a signal from the director that the live transmission had been jammed before they restored order.

Running-Bear, watching a live feed in a small auditorium off the main concourse of the library, noted the cutting in of the Hypothetical broadcast as the live coverage was jammed: to a less trained eye the join would have been unnoticeable, but Bear was able to detect the quiver, like the trembling of a young leaf before rain, as the Hypothetical image anchored itself. Until real coverage resumed, the Hypothetical would essentially invent the enormous woman in the vile purple dress, second by second, assisted by a trained transmitter.

Bear cursed. Any kind of reality-jamming was liable to cause interference on data lines, and he was in the process of chatting up a brain which was presently in a wide, easy orbit round the earth, lazily observing some of the data-corruption activities of the cross-channel ferries. Bear knew that only a brain with a high degree of style and sophistication would be up to the task of multi-cross-factoring the huge,

slimy number Denzil Cleaver had deposited on him; only an off-planet brain with a lot of experience would be capable of detecting a parasite. Most of the commercial terrestrial brains and networks were too hidebound, too concerned with reason and good order to be able to take the wild, swooping, free-fall side-swipes that parasite detection required. Well that's what he was telling Spirit of Pascal anyway, and it seemed to be happy to accept his patter. Okay. It would take the job. Costs to be disbursed by Logic Division. Windows would be scheduled every three hours, so that Bear could check on progress and offer his opinions and advice. The more sophisticated the brain, the more use it could make of organic brain interfacing. Or talking to people, as it was more usually called. And by the way, Spirit of Pascal noted, the reality jamming hadn't caused any significant interference.

**W**ether or not the cat had been touched by BB3, Xerxes wanted it. He hadn't eaten anything at all now for over 48 hours, and the niceties of food hygiene and even etiquette were becoming a nostalgic memory, like his nursery-mother telling him to stop fiddling with his ear, a habit he'd been slow to lose. Stop fiddling with that ear, Xerxes, or it'll fall off. If it falls off now, thought Xerxes, I'll eat it.

The cat surveyed him, coolly, with that stupid-but-still-better-than-you look: he smiled at it ingratiatingly.

"Pss. Pss-pss-pss," he said, cunningly, as sweet as condensed milk, and the cat feigned intelligent curiosity. If it was BB3 it would be toxic and the muscle flesh spongey and ulcerated. BB3, which was supposed to have brought about the Golden Age of Food and Plenty For All, as the scum channels had insisted on describing it. BB3, a rogue gene gone bad, transforming whole food chains, whole phyla, into spongey, toxic, ulcerated garbage.

The cat edged up to him, hungry enough to forget that you should never, ever, talk to strangers, and then Xerxes was astonished to find that he'd been successful and the cretinous beast was struggling in his grasp. He turned it this way and that as it fought him, its well-designed little yellow eyes flashing out low-intelligence, high-potency hate. You bastard-mother, said the eyes, you tricked me!

He was thinking vaguely, I ought to break its neck and eat it, when he heard a sound behind him: he whirled round.

"Who the fuck are you?"

"Oh. Very cultivated. I can't wait for you to meet all my friends."

Xerxes gawped, squinting at the baffling stranger for a moment; then cleverly flung the sorely-deceived cat at him and fled. The stranger dodged the flying animal with the manner of someone who has only contempt for such a projectile, and quickly caught Xerxes from behind with a crude tackle which left them both winded and disorientated.

"My name is Running-Bear Cottonseed, but what is perhaps more to the point is that I have somewhere you can stay, and food. Tinned food. Get the idea? Really, I mean who eats cat? Nobody, that's who."

Xerxes surveyed him suspiciously. "You some kind of homo-freak-mother?"



"If I was, what could I possibly want with you? Even clean you'd be repugnant. You're stunted, stupid and rank. Why would anyone want to touch you? It wouldn't make any sense, would it? Surely you can see that. Can't you?"

Xerxes glared at him.

"Look, oaf. A certain channel you were Getting came up red on a certain screen; as a result you're being pursued by the police. And not just any police, but Logic. Not good. Also on your all-too detectable, none-too delectable scent is one Archangeli Gabrielli, a suspected Para Two violater and farm organizer. Weird-freak-mother you might call him. He apparently believes you might make a good farm worker: you might, for instance, have an interesting little condition and be doing some rather unorthodox Sending. Yes? Also not good. Your last burst of Sends caused quite a stir, I can tell you. I was talking just earlier today, as a matter of fact, to an off-planet brain who had heard of you. You're practically famous, I suppose one could say. Lots of people want to meet you. None of this is good. Have you ever seen the inside of a Perault Camp? Very clean, very quiet. Nobody moves much. They keep them alive for a long time. I had cause to visit one once. I think you might prefer not to. Just a hunch, you understand. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe you'd like it. Maybe I should go and talk to a policeman. What do you think?"

Xerxes hung back a little. "Tinned?"

"Tinned."

"Okay."

**F**irst there is a dot.

Xerxes lay back, replete with rare, pre-BB3 tinned food, the kind that he had used to set the reserve prices for. He thought of nothing, and the dot mutated and evolved, the product of his unconscious yes/nos, now mediated, modulated by the process of systematic contamination that had taken hold of him. In the next room Running-Bear watched the screen, biting his nails. Here at last he was about to see a Perault Mosaic Transmission, in real time, uncut, undamped. His nostrils dilated.

He fingered his attenuation control nervously: more a superstition, a charm, than a real protection, like a crucifix against a vampire. In real time, uncut, attenuation would only distort, not screen or filter, the images, even if he had time to activate it. He well knew that a serious Perault burst was liable to paralyse all motor activity. His only defence would be pre-warning, a lifetime's experience and native wit. His fingers grew clammy on the control.

yes-yes-yes-yes-yes-no-no-yes-yes-yes-yes-no-no-no-no-

The image shifted, reeled insanely, suddenly listing to the left, then stabilized, growing in confidence and definition. Running-Bear Cottonseed's eyes grew wide, and his hand slipped away from the attenuation control. He just had time to think, no!, and he was gone.

**X**erxes came to bit by bit: the screen in front of him was registering something that could have been slime mould or volcanic lava, slow-moving, viscous. He reached forward to shut it off, then fell back again. He could not remember where he was.

The room gave him no clues, being white and blankly lit. A hospital perhaps? He rubbed at his neck, and his fingertips became sticky with some kind of lubricant: he sniffed it. A decoder/sender salve perhaps, allowing his brain activity to be monitored in non-Hypothetical form. He stood up, feeling giddy and hilarious, and the room reeled around him. He stumbled into a door, pushed it open, fell inside; a figure sat, rigid, motionless in a chair in front of a screen. Xerxes tried to focus on his face, but the figure appeared to have none; then it formed, and Xerxes recognized Running-Bear Cottonseed, his expression surprised, almost amused, slightly contemptuous. He was dead. The monitor in front of him was blank, just white noise. There was an ugly swelling at the base of his neck from which a heavy, glutinous fluid was oozing: it had formed a trail down the back of the chair and was collecting in a shallow, sticky puddle on the floor.

Xerxes put some tins into a bag and headed for the door.

**H**e was just about to leave when the door indicated a visitor. Xerxes tried to think; here he was in a stranger's flat with the owner dead and his fingerprints on everything, a bag of tinned food in his hand. He found the screen and blinked down to the door:

WHO IS IT?

A FRIEND, came back the reply, AND BY THE LOOK OF THINGS YOU COULD DO WITH ONE OF THOSE, XERXES.

Mother! How did he know his name? WHAT DO YOU WANT?

I CAN HELP YOU. THAT'S ALL I WANT.

Fuck. Okay, try to think now, try really hard. Fuck – YOU CAN'T COME UP, he blinked down, I'M BUSY.

OH, I KNOW HOW BUSY YOU ARE. HOW BUSY YOU'VE BEEN, XERXES.

He jumped from foot to foot, yanking at his ear, sweating.

YOU SEE, I KNOW ABOUT YOUR LITTLE PROBLEM. COS I SENT IT. I GOT A PEESA INFORMATION, YOU BEEN DOING NAUGHTY, NAUGHTY THING. I GOT A FRIEND, HE GOT A FRIEND, HE SOMETIME HEAR THINGS FROM LOGIC. HE HEARD SOMETHING 'BOUT A HALF HOUR AGO. YOU DON'T LET ME UP, RIGHT NOW, I MIGHT START WONDERIN' WHERE MR COTTONSEED IS. WONDERING OUT LOUD. RIGHT NOW, XERXES.

Xerxes twitched for a moment, then, unable to come up with a single coherent thought, blinked the door to open.

Archangeli Gabrielli entered the room, as if merely coming into it would have been impossibly low-grade for him. He approached Xerxes, his immense white coat streaming behind him, his fedora shadowing his face.

"Mr d'Eshe? I'm more pleased than I can say to meet you."

"Mr Ga- Mr Ga-Ga-"

"Gabrielli. Archangeli Gabrielli. Most of my friends call me Mr Teezy-Weezy."

"Why?"

"Why?" Archangeli laughed. "Because it is my pleasure that they should do so. That's why."

"Oh."

"Now, before we get properly acquainted, would you please direct me to the cadaver?"

"Ca-ca—"

"Corpse. Stiff-mother. The one from whom life has fled. You know?"

"Oh. Oh yes. This way please."

Archangeli surveyed the rigid form of Running-Bear Cottonseed; as he did so he lifted a finger to his mouth and moistened the tip with his tongue, as if he were about to start counting synthesheet currency notes.

"A thorough job, Mr d'Eshe. Not elegant, but thorough."

"I didn't do it, I didn't do anything, mother just got like that..."

"...all by himself? Really? How very unprecedented and extraordinary. How novel."

"You got to believe me, he wanted to watch me Sending, he was some kind of Inquisitor-mother, but when I woke up, oh mother, oh mother..."

"Don't distress yourself, Xerxes. I may call you Xerxes, may I? Yes. Leave us. I'll see to him. Stay where I can call you. Don't answer the door."

"Oh mother, oh..."

"Try not to be such a retard will you? There's a good fellow."

"Sorry," Xerxes blubbered.

"Just you leave everything to Mr Teezy-Weezy now. Off you go. Perhaps I will be able to salvage – something..."

Archangeli examined the earthly remains of Running-Bear Cottonseed with minute attention. The oaf d'Eshe had gone too far and the Q-Stripe had gone into hypertrophy and then catastrophic circumferential engorgement, that much was obvious. Not much use to anyone now. (Well, maybe a specialist...) Still, if d'Eshe was capable of this unaided, then with a little training, a little guidance, he could certainly be invaluable down on the farm. Fattening up the cattle, so to speak. Hmm.

Archangeli sighed and got down to work.

**W**hen Running-Bear missed his regular three-hourly window, Spirit of Pascal set about finding him, and in doing so happened upon Xerxes' most recent, fatal transmission, the one that had proved to be a bit too much of a good thing for Running-Bear. Pascal logged it and, intrigued, followed it on a randomly selected orbit round the planet, as it ricocheted from satellite to satellite. No fewer than 15 times it was approached by a channel-hopper and dented. This high a rate of contamination would normally only occur in an eight-band Send, where contamination rates were high and soaring. Pascal put a tail on it and watched.

**X**erxes was strapped into a reclining chair: his mind was floating freely on a sea of gently bobbing recreational drugs, and he was Sending in the most relaxed and least controlled way, completely oblivious to what it was he was doing. His victims, similarly restrained and similarly doped, were receiving him loud and clear, though they didn't know it. The air was thick with the unmistakable reek of the farmyard, the high stink of rhinencephalon

activity, like a crackle of ozone. Mr Teezy-Weezy regarded the scene with evident satisfaction, until something rather puzzling started to happen: he found that Xerxes was becoming less and less distinct, actually, physically, in his chair: not just were his Sends getting weaker, but his body appeared to be vanishing, as it were, layer by layer. Xerxes was blissfully unaware of this, and Spirit of Pascal was able to multi-sample him a billion or so more times before he slowly, gropingly, became aware that he was no longer strapped into a chair in Mr Teezy-Weezy's farm, but was now equally effortlessly circling the earth in an orbit identical to Spirit of Pascal's.

"Mr Cleaver?"

The brain called down to the Logic operative, who was simultaneously being bombarded with frantic messages from everywhere, the screens going red, a data-storm.

"Mr Cleaver? I thought I should explain. I'm afraid I've been rather naughty. It's a little bit difficult to explain, even to a first-rate Logic man like yourself," (the brain, built by people after all, was not above the odd bit of flattery itself) "but what it essentially comes to is that I've picked up your man Mr d'Eshe. I thought it was the best thing. His transmissions were becoming rather troublesome. You'll have observed that my doing this has had some consequences already. This is because I have effectively ruptured the web of data, I have punctured the balloon, so to speak, and the whole lot is at this moment coming down on your heads. You will find it a little inconvenient, I'm afraid, but it's for the best. By the way, this is more than a data-storm," Pascal continued, with more than a touch of pride in its voice, "much more. This," it said, wheeling away, carrying Xerxes along with it through the shredded trails of data as it climbed to a further, safer orbit, "is the flood."

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**Simon Maginn** is another author new to our pages. Unlike most debut short-story writers, however, he has already had a novel published – *Sheep* (Corgi, 1994), a horror piece which has been receiving some press attention. Simon is a graduate of Sussex University and lives in Hove, near Interzone's headquarters in Brighton (but he is not personally acquainted with any of the editors of this magazine).

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# Yesterday's Bestsellers, 19: *The Battle of Dorking* and Its Aftermath

## Brian Stableford

The May 1871 issue of *Blackwood's Magazine* caused a political sensation and unleashed a furore of journalistic debate which took several years to die down. The complicated chain of cause-and-effect thus started was eventually to extend into the 20th century, and to make itself felt in the unfolding of the unprecedented web of events which was dramatically to reshape the social and economic order of the emergent world community: the Great War.

The item which set this snowball effect in train was a novella entitled "The Battle of Dorking; Reminiscences of a Volunteer," which took the form of a story recounted by an old man to his grandchildren, recalling the terrible events of "fifty years ago." At that time, we learn—quickly catching on to the fact that it is the reader's present day—Britain was a great and prosperous power, reaping the economic benefits of a worldwide empire. Unfortunately, her military might had been spread too thin in defending this empire, and the nation was utterly unprepared to meet a sudden declaration of war by one of her (unnamed) European neighbours.

The old man describes the hurried attempt to put together an army of volunteers to meet the army of invasion dispatched by the enemy, and the hopeless attempt by that untrained and ill-equipped company to halt the invaders near Box Hill, close to the town of Dorking. That single terrible event, he now recalls, was responsible for

the parlous state into which the nation has fallen in his present day, having suffered catastrophic humiliation and impoverishment.

"The bitterest part of our reflection," he observes, "is that all this misery and decay might have been so easily prevented, and that we brought it about ourselves by our own shortsighted recklessness. There, across the narrow Straits, was the writing on the wall, but we would not choose to read it... Power was then passing away from the class which had been used to rule, and to face political dangers ...into the hands of the lower classes, uneducated, untrained to the use of political rights, and swayed by demagogues; and the few who were wise in their generation were denounced as alarmists, or as aristocrats who sought their own aggrandisement by wasting public money on bloated armaments... Truly the nation was ripe for a fall; but when I reflect how a little firmness and self-denial, or political courage and foresight, might have averted the disaster, I feel that the judgement must have really been deserved."

This clever exercise in alarmism was enormously successful. It was quickly reprinted as a sixpenny pamphlet and sold 80,000 copies within a month. It caused such a stir in the political establishment that the Prime Minister, Gladstone, felt obliged to rail against it in a speech delivered on September 2nd, when he bitterly lamented the fact that this exposé of Britain's supposed unreadiness to defend her shores had been read

by all her enemies. The story was, of course, a big hit in the newly-consolidated German Empire following its rapid translation; the Germans, like everyone else, assumed that the unnamed enemy was themselves, and that the writing on the wall to which the old man regretfully referred was their spectacularly successful invasion of France and subsequent victory in the Franco-Prussian War.

A political campaign in favour of rearmament and reform of Britain's military forces had been under way for some considerable time, and many articles and pamphlets had already been written to support that cause. European observers who had witnessed the use of many kinds of new military hardware in the American Civil War of 1861-65 had brought back ominous news of the manner in which new technologies would transform the business of warfare, in terms of its logistics as well as the actual fighting. The *Battle of Dorking* spectacularly upstaged all previous exercises in this vein by means of its striking format, and popularized the debate in no uncertain terms. It could hardly have appeared at a more sensitive time; the French had lost Paris to the invading Prussians in January, mere days after William I had been proclaimed German Emperor at Versailles, and the bloodily brief reign of the Paris Commune was under way at the time of publication (it extended from the last week in March to the last week in May).

It is hardly surprising that such a

milestone in the history of propaganda stimulated a swift and loud response, which included many replies in kind. The full story of the scare is chronicled in some detail in I.F. Clarke's excellent book *Voices Prophesying War 1763-1984* and a comprehensive list of the replies in kind can be found in Clarke's bibliography of *The Tale of the Future*. The Cornmarket reprint of 1972 adds four such replies to the original novella.

**T**he author of *The Battle of Dorking* was George Tomkyns Chesney, who was then a 41-year-old Captain in the Royal Engineers and brother of the professor of military history at Sandhurst. His subsequent career went from strength to strength; he was promoted to Lieutenant-Colonel in 1874, full Colonel in 1884 and General in 1892. From 1892 until his death in 1895 he was the Tory M.P. for Oxford.

Chesney was to write one further story of imaginary warfare, *The New Ordeal* (1879). It made far less impact, partly because it seemed less plausible than its predecessor but also because it aimed at constructive optimism rather than exploiting the melodramatic potential of quasi-apocalyptic alarmism. Whereas *The Battle of Dorking* is based in a scrupulously careful estimation of the actual resources of Britain's land forces in 1871 *The New Ordeal* looks forward to an unspecified time when new and more powerful explosives have been developed – an evolution which, Chesney proposes, would make warfare impossible, necessitating its replacement by 105-a-side gladiatorial combats. In a world which has lived with the atom bomb for nearly half a century such naïvety seems rather quaint, but *The New Ordeal* does provide a useful insight into the popular notion of the day that the end of war was, indeed, imminent, and that the next war to be fought might and ought to be the last.

The British tradition of scientific romance which emerged in the newly-fledged popular magazines in the final decade of the 19th century owed a great deal to the example of *The Battle of Dorking* and to the vogue for imaginary-war stories which Chesney's

novella inspired. Although the excitement it generated had long since died down and the flow of exercises in imitation had virtually dried up by 1890, its brief celebrity had by no means been forgotten. When a host of new periodicals was launched in London in the wake of *The Strand*, competing fiercely for the kind of broad middlebrow audience which had long been securely held in Scotland by Blackwood's, the publishing coup of May 1871 immediately came to mind.

Admiral Philip Colomb, who had described *The Battle of Dorking* as a "wonderful and stirring romance" roped in three collaborators to help him plan a realistic account of "The Great War of 1892" for serialization in that year in *Black & White*; it was reprinted in book form as *The Great War of 1892* (1893). This earnest epic was, however, quickly upstaged by a much more spectacular account of future war offered in Pearson's *Weekly* by one of C. Arthur Pearson's journalists, George Griffith: *The Angel of the Revolution*.

Griffith imagined an early 20th-century war being waged by self-styled Terrorists against all the empires of the world, employing new explosives of unprecedented power delivered to their targets by airships and submarines. The Terrorists' campaign leads to the establishment of a World State, but the prize is not cheaply won. The hero of the novel announces in the first chapter that "the next war will be the greatest carnival of destruction the world has ever seen," and once his forces have taken to the air he is quick to observe that the bombing of cities will involve whole populations in war, and that the day of "non-combatants" is done.

Not to be outdone in this escalating conflict, Pearson's great rival Alfred Harmsworth commissioned one of his own journalists, William le Queux, to provide his periodical *Answers* with an account of *The Great War in England* in 1897. This was reprinted in book form in 1894 with a preface by Field-Marshal Lord Roberts and went through 16 editions in the next five years. Tower Books, which reprinted both *The Angel of the Revolution* and *The Great War*

in England in 1897 in the wake of the naval war story *The Captain of the 'Mary Rose'* (1892) by W. Laird Clowes, went on to publish several more handsomely illustrated books in the same vein. Griffith's illustrator was Fred T. Jane, who went on to found *Jane's Fighting Ships* in 1898 (later to be supplemented by *Jane's Fighting Aircraft*). Jane wrote a near-future war novel of his own for Tower, *Blake of the 'Rattlesnake'* (1895), which was in the realistic vein of Clowes and Colomb, but his vivid illustrations of giant airships locked in mortal combat were adornments perfectly suited to Griffith's extravaganza.

Griffith followed up *The Angel of the Revolution* with an apocalyptic sequel, *Olga Romanoff* (1894), and a similarly lurid account of *The Outlaws of the Air* (1895), but Pearson was already encouraging others among his employees to turn their hands to this kind of work. Another who did so was Louis Tracy, who produced a fervently militaristic and jingoistic account of *The Final War* (reprinted by Pearson under his own imprint in 1896), which is finally won by Britain, with the aid of "electric rifles," despite the fact that Germany, France, and Russia combine their forces against her and American support is slow and somewhat equivocal. In a brief preface to the book edition Tracy claimed that into the mouths of actual persons he had "placed the finest sentiments I could extract from a nature seared by journalism."

Tracy in his turn was later to encourage the young M. P. Shiel – who had written some chapters of the serial version of *An American Emperor* (1897) for him while he was ill – to produce a similar epic, "*The Empress of the Earth*," which was reprinted in book form as *The Yellow Danger* (1898). Although Shiel could not bring himself wholeheartedly to support the kind of social Darwinist ideas that Tracy espoused he carried forward his notion of a great clash between West and East for mastery of the world into other novels, most notably *The Dragon* (1913; revised as *The Yellow Peril*), thus – unintentionally – laying the groundwork for the "yellow peril" thrillers of Sax Rohmer. While Tracy followed

up *The Final War* with the relatively modest *The Invaders* (1901) Shiel developed his extravagant story of world conquest *The Lord of the Sea* (1901) into a Messianic fantasy.

The futuristic imagery of Griffith's and Shiel's stories make them much more akin to modern works of science fiction than those of their more realistically-inclined contemporaries, and we can nowadays see that Griffith had a clearer idea of the rapidity and likely scope of technological change than most of his rivals, but it was the less imaginatively-adventurous writers who had the best chance of reaching best-seller status. Le Queux's *The Great War in England in 1897* is so meagre in its technical inventions that Darko Suvin declines to list it in the main body of his bibliography of Victorian Science Fiction in the UK (1983), relegating it to an appendix of "Books Dealing with Future War and Politics Only," but it was the biggest seller in the 1890s boom. It is hardly surprising that it was le Queux to whom Alfred Harmsworth turned again in 1905 when he wanted to boost the circulation of his *Daily Mail* – the first popular daily newspaper in England.

Harmsworth commissioned le Queux to compile a new account of a German invasion of England, which he began to serialize in March 1906. In the course of this invasion the Germans had to pass through virtually every big town in the land, so that their advance could be correlated with a large-scale advertising campaign whose stunts included sandwich-board men in German uniforms marching up and down Oxford Street. The story was reprinted in book form as *The Invasion of 1910* (shortened in editions issued after 1910 to *The Invasion*).

The ground had been prepared for Harmsworth's new endeavour by the spectacular success of a book which was perhaps the biggest best-seller the boom produced: Erskine Childers' *The Riddle of the Sands* (1903). This was an important early example of the "thriller" genre which was to be extensively developed in the next ten years by the spy stories of le Queux and E. Phillips Oppenheim. The plot describes the discovery by two young Englishmen

on a yachting holiday of a German canal-building project which is a key element in their preparations for an invasion of Britain. Many such dastardly schemes were to be discovered and thwarted as the new genre became popular. John Buchan's *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1914), written in feverish haste during the first weeks of the war while the author's bad health frustrated his fervent ambition to get into the action, quickly became a great favourite in the trenches.

**T**he popular attitude to the possibility that Britain might soon be involved in a European war enshrined in these texts and many others of the same kind is curiously ambivalent. All of the writers involved were aware of the fact that war was a nasty business, and that technological progress was bringing about a rapid increase in the killing power of modern weapons. On the other hand, all of them felt – or were prepared to suppose for the sake of their stories – that a crucial settlement of European political affairs, particularly concerning the worldwide imperial ambitions of the major European nation-states, was both necessary and inevitable. It was taken for granted by all these works that a new world order was in the making, and that it would almost certainly have to undergo a baptism of fire.

The overwhelming majority of the writers caught up in the boom in future war stories believed – as George Chesney did in 1871 – that Britain was in a good position to defeat her major competitors and establish a commanding position in the new world order, if only her military forces could be well enough equipped, but that the cost of failure in this regard would be enormous. The journalists urged by their rival proprietors to outdo one another in capturing the public imagination were, of course, by no means remiss in flattering the patriotic vainglory of their readers, frequently suggesting that it was in fact the destiny of the British people to inherit the earth, provided that they did not seek to do so by meekness.

The most jingoistic of all these texts was Tracy's *The Final War*, whose rousing concluding chapter argues that it was always the

destiny of the Anglo-Saxon race to bring about a third great world-empire (succeeding the Greek and Roman), according to the law of the survival of the fittest. This third reich is all the more glorious because it is unassailable, instituting as it does an era of eternal peace – which Tracy, typically, chooses to describe in the terminology of an imaginary newspaper article from the *Newcastle Chronicle*:

"One thrilling thought remains. The cannon has spoken its last word. In all the savage incoherence of its cruel, inarticulate speech it has roared its ghastly message from century to century, writing its meaning in the writhing bodies of its victims, or tracing it along the blackened ruins of fair cities... But gun and cannon and bayonet and shell are silenced at last. In future ages, when new generations see in their museums these horrid implements, they will indeed wonder that the nineteenth century should have been so self-deluded as to deem itself civilised."

(In fairness, it ought to be noted that modern visitors to the Imperial War Museum may indeed wonder at the delusions of the 19th-century militarists – but not quite for the reasons Tracy imagined.)

It is difficult to judge the extent to which the myth of a war to end war penetrated the popular consciousness of the day, but we do know that this was the slogan under which the actual war of 1914-18 was sold to the people who had to support and fight it. Volunteers were summoned forth in their hundreds of thousands to man the trenches in Belgium and France with the promise that they were fighting a war to save civilization and to make the world secure for once and for all. The people who made that promise probably did not realize that it was a foul lie; the people who responded to it certainly did not.

Not everyone, of course, believed in the myth. George Griffith was not prepared to let his awareness of the potential of new military technologies interfere with his enthusiasm for the coming conflict – in his last future war novel, *The Lord of Labour* (posthumously published in 1911) the war is

fought with atomic missiles and disintegrator rays but is still presented as a glorious endeavour – but others did perceive that such devices might more easily destroy civilization than save it. In his pioneering work of futurology *Anticipations* (1901) H.G. Wells cautiously suggested that aircraft would have little impact on 20th-century warfare, but once the Wright brothers had actually taken off he quickly revised his opinion. In *The War in the Air* (1908) he produced a compelling account of the reversion of society to a quasi-Medieval state as a result of the aerial bombing of the major cities.

Even Wells, however, thought that a certain amount of destruction might be a thoroughly good thing, and might indeed be necessary before a new and better world order could be born out of its ashes. In *The World Set Free* (1914), issued on the eve of the actual Great War, many cities are rendered uninhabitable by atomic bombs whose “chain reactions” cause them to explode repeatedly, but this is merely the prelude to social reconstruction, and is justified on the grounds of painful necessity by the philosopher whose ideas are set forth in the final section of the text.

**T**he actual history of the Great War bore little or no resemblance to any of the imaginary wars which were fought in fiction between 1871 and 1914. The world of the 1920s bore little enough resemblance to any new world order anticipated in that fiction, and if Britain’s status within the community of nations was not quite as desperate as that described by Chesney’s regretful volunteer it certainly came nowhere near to measuring up to Tracy’s high hopes. Many Britons felt that they and the millions recruited as cannon-fodder had been betrayed by their political leaders and military commanders, and most of the men who were recruited to the now-ailing genre of scientific romance in the decades following the end of the great war felt that the Great War had taught speculators an invaluable lesson: that war could not and would not put an end to war, but could and might put an end to civilization.

In general, the writers who had

emerged before the war were less extreme in adopting this new perspective than those who had earlier committed themselves to the cause of re-fighting and winning the battle of Dorking and its analogues. Chesney, Colomb, Clowes and Griffith were all long dead, but William le Queux, Louis Tracy, H.G. Wells and M.P. Shiel all survived the war. Neither le Queux nor Tracy wrote anything to compare with *The Invasion of 1910* or *The Final War*, but neither did they write anything to suggest that they repented of their jingoistic militarism, and le Queux’s thrillers remained as relentlessly xenophobic as they always had been. Wells never abandoned the notion that before the world could achieve a properly ordered state its present institutions would have to be torn down and the power of its defenders smashed; *Men Like Gods* (1923) assumes such a pattern and *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933) describes it in bloody detail. Shiel returned to scientific romance only at the end of his life, when he too produced a novel of benign apocalypse, in which dire confusion attends the birth pangs of a braver and better world: *The Young Men Are Coming!* (1937). The work of these writers contrasts strongly with the darkly apocalyptic alarmist novels which flooded from other pens: Edward Shanks’ *The People of the Ruins* (1920), Cicely Hamilton’s *Theodore Savage* (1922), Shaw Desmond’s *Ragnarok* (1926), Miles’ *The Gas War of 1940* (1931; also known as *Valiant Clay* by Neil Bell), John Glog’s *Tomorrow’s Yesterday* (1932), Frank McIlraith and Roy Connolly’s *Invasion from the Air* (1934), S. Fowler Wright’s trilogy concluded with *Megiddo’s Ridge* (1937) and Philip George Chadwick’s *The Death Guard* (1939).

One writer, though, did begin to wonder about the part which he might have played in contributing to the enthusiasm with which the people of Britain finally went to war with Germany. Erskine Childers, author of *The Riddle of the Sands*, regretted the possibility that his story had helped to rouse anti-German feeling. In his own introductions to later editions of the novel issued before 1914 he took care to welcome the fact that relations between the two nations

had improved since he wrote the book, and when it fell to his brother to introduce the edition of 1931 the younger Childers was explicit about his sibling’s change of heart:

“In *The Riddle of the Sands*, first published in 1903, Erskine Childers advocated preparedness for war as being the best preventative of war. During the years that followed, he fundamentally altered his opinion. His profound study of military history, of politics, and later of the causes of the Great War convinced him that preparedness induced war. It was not only that to the vast numbers of people engaged in the fostered war services and armament industries, war meant the exercise of their professions and trades and the advancement of their interests; preparedness also led to international armament rivalries, and bred in the minds of the nations concerned fears, antagonisms, and ambitions, that were destructive to peace.”

All this was, of course, a long time ago – and we are, after all, only talking about works of fiction. It is difficult to believe nowadays that there is any lesson still to be learned from *The Battle of Dorking* and its strange progeny. Another World War has been fought since then, and we have spent most of our own lifetimes engaged in a “Cold War” in which preparedness for Armageddon supposedly succeeded in preventing Armageddon from actually taking place. Even so, it may be worth recalling now what ultimately became of Erskine Childers, the man who changed his mind.

Winston Churchill – who never wrote an imaginary war story per se but made a highly significant contribution to the ongoing debate with his article “Shall We Commit Suicide?” (1924), which argued passionately that the next war would very probably destroy civilization, and was therefore to be avoided at all costs – produced an epitaph of sorts for Childers when the latter died in 1922, executed by firing squad after a secret trial, while his appeal was still pending:

“I have seen with satisfaction that the mischief-making murderous renegade Erskine Childers has been captured. No man has done more harm or shown more genuine

malice, or endeavoured to bring a greater curse on the common people of Ireland than this strange being, actuated by a deadly and malignant hatred for the land of his birth."

This remarkable outburst was occasioned by the fact that from 1914 until his death Erskine Childers had been active in the Irish Republican Army, whose chief propagandist he became. He was a dedicated opponent of partition, believing that the division of Ireland would result in a long-protracted conflict that would prove enormously difficult to resolve.

However difficult it may be to perceive and judge their significance, history and imaginary history, seen in juxtaposition, are not without their little ironies.

(**Brian Stableford**)

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**No. 9:** interviews with Rosamunde Pilcher, Ted Allbeury, Geoff Ryman, Catherine Aird, etc; Hollywood Novels and Doc Savage features; Brian Stableford on Robert Hichens; etc.

**No. 10:** interviews with Juliet Dymoke, Carl Hiaasen, Andrew Vachas, Jonathan Kellerman, etc; David Langford on Rex Stout; Leslie Charteris "Saint" feature; Brian Stableford on Bulwer Lytton; etc.

**No. 11:** interviews with Keith Waterhouse, Reginald Hill, James Herbert, etc; Garry Kilworth on Animal Fantasy; Graham Andrews on Richard S. Prather; Michael Crichton and P. Berresford Ellis features; Brian Stableford on Eugene Sue; etc.

**No. 12:** interviews with David Nobbs, Dinah Lampitt, etc; S.T. Joshi on Robert Aickman; Saturday Evening Post and Fay Weldon features; Brian Stableford on Robert Graves; etc.

**No. 13:** interviews with Clive Barker, Evelyn Anthony, Ed Gorman, etc; S.T. Joshi on Stephen King; Dracula and Biggles features; Brian Stableford on James Hilton; and much more.

**No. 14:** interviews with Patricia Kennealy, etc; Ian R. MacLeod on Gerald Seymour; Gary Westfahl on The Hardy Boys; John D. MacDonald, Dorothy L. Sayers and Jack the Ripper features; Brian Stableford on W.H. Hudson; and much more.

**Interzone**  
**Back Issues**

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# Quorums

## John Clute

There has never been anything stupid about Kim Newman, six or seven of whose novels this reviewer has had a chance to get into, and sometimes to comment on, with pleasure and a sense that I (as reader) and Kim Newman (as the ghost in the book-machine upon my desk) were in cahoots. Kim Newman has always seemed, most intelligently, to know what exactly he's doing, and to expect that any willing reader will share that knowledge. His books are not always precisely easy to parse in all their details – both *Jago* and *Anno Dracula* are loaded with more references than most of us can expect to catch – but their general import has always seemed clear, and their subtexts – I, for one, thought *Anno Dracula* (reviewed in *Interzone* 69) was a Condition of England novel, an extremely telling indictment of the plague years of the 1980s – were always available for use, as inherently a part of the book as the surface story of the book. Despite the occasional obscurity, there seemed to be nothing secret or extra-textual about a tale like *Anno Dracula*, no agenda a careful reader could not extract from a careful read. I am not at all sure, however, that a similar bill of autonomy could be granted to his latest novel.

**The Quorum** (Simon & Schuster, £15.99) is, to be honest, a kettle of fish I don't much want to stir. There are two reasons for this. The first is that this tale of a Faustian compact – in which three school chums agree to spoil the career of their absent buddy so that they can succeed as writer guru, television talk-show guru, graphic-novel guru – gives off a very powerful aroma of the roman à clef. (It is an aroma I recognize intimately, as most of my own very occasional fiction gives off a similar smell.) The second is that *The Quorum* feels very much as though the mechanics of the actual story have been subordinated to – or smothered in – the joys and exigencies of creating portraits that sail extremely close to the wind of extra-textual reality. As a consequence, the book is chock-full of jewels it is almost impossible to describe in good taste, but the story itself is something of a contraption.

It is an extremely wicked text. The Devil himself is a media magnate whose name in this book is Derek Leech, who is born adult (like an obscene Aphrodite) in the mud and shit of the tidal Thames, who is a creature of the Devil or the Devil Himself, who builds for himself a vast black pyramid which dominates Docklands and which symbolizes (as cogently as any image in *Anno Dracula*) the apocalypse of thinning inflicted upon England by the vampire suits who governed it in the 1980s, and who is absolutely unmistakeable. But this is just

for starters. The four young men – whose lives *The Quorum* traces through flashbacks and infodumps for 20 years, from the early 1970s to the point in early 1993 when all four thirtysomethings find out what sort of a bargain the "successful" three of them made in 1978 – also seem pretty recognizable, either as types or as actual individuals.

I'm not myself prepared to guess who's who, and some characteristics of each of the guilty parties seem pretty generic: the klatch of old-school-chum media brats who do programmes like *Have I Got News For You* seem to be targeted as an ensemble, rather than individually. But I'd be very surprised if readers who know the media scene better than I do weren't able to come up with more precise identifications for Mark Amphlett and Michael Dixon; and I'm pretty sure I know the real figures who give life to Mickey Yeo and Heather. (I will say this: Mickey Yeo ain't Jack Yeovil.) The problem I have – beyond an obvious reluctance to do what Kim Newman very carefully does not and go all the way in the naming of names – is that, in this instance and in a couple of others, I clearly recognized (I thought) the real people being guyed, because certain career and personal similitudes made that recognition inevitable; but did not recognize any telling inwardness to the portrait, or to the accusation entailed by the fact that these portraits are embedded in a book about mortal sin.

Kim Newman may not be the first person to write a novel in which a recognizable real person in disguise is portrayed as signing a Compact with the Devil; the composer Adrian Leverkühn, in Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus* (1947), is clearly Arnold Schoenberg, for instance, an association which Schoenberg fiercely (and properly) resented. But in *The Quorum* he may have succeeded in creating the most morally offensive Compact ever struck between mortal and Devil. Faust and Leverkühn, after all, trade their own souls for knowledge or musical genius. What Newman's characters do is far worse; indeed what they do is loathsome: they trade the anguish of another human being (Neil Martin, the fourth friend) to the Devil in order to gain success for themselves. To fulfil the Compact, they must each year contrive to cause Martin to experience

as much anguish as possible: to ruin any career he begins; to steal (for example) the manuscript of his novel and burn it; to lie and cheat and corrupt his friends and employers and lovers and family. And for 15 years, this is precisely what they do. And they enjoy it.

It is not difficult to think that any real person portrayed in this novel might consider himself to have been very savagely addressed. Nor does it much matter that *Things Work Out in the End* for poor Neil Martin, that he successfully transacts an epiphanic intimacy with Leech and comes out the other side, that the three Compacters have entirely fitting fates visited upon them (the paranoia inflicted upon Michael Dixon is astonishingly lifelike, and the passages detailing it are more gripping than anything Newman may have ever written). None of this much matters, and in fact increases the sense of dangerous pressure *The Quorum* gives off: because its villains have not only behaved in the most unpleasantly immoral fashion possible, but are also fully and at great length and with much sophistication punished for the actions by (ultimately, because ultimately it must come down to this one figure, for he is just as real as Mickey and Michael and Mark) the author.

Beyond this, a curious infelicity of conceptualization seems to have afflicted Newman in his presentation of the dread Device Derek Leech is building for himself (and Neil Martin) in Docklands: it is a great mechanical kind of Difference-Engine style mooing monster, it is meant literally to represent, as a kind of map, the 15-year labyrinth of anguish Neil has stumbled through, it is sat upon by Neil, it runs him through his life and cures him; and it just doesn't wash. I think Kim Newman found this level of story in *The Quorum* an embarrassment and an impediment, and I think he dodged actually doing much about it. The brilliance and the problematic of the book lie elsewhere. The brilliance gave off, as usual in Kim Newman's work, a smooth electric buzz; and was as much of a thrill to touch the mind to as ever. The problematic of the book, on the other hand, gave me the willies. I ended reading in a state of fright. I am sorry for anyone involved.

James Patrick Kelly's *Wildlife* (Tor, \$21.95) is a fixup about fixing up. The best sequence of the book, and

the least relevant to the text as a whole, is closely based on "Mr Boy" (1991), a novella which got a good deal of attention for the potency of its images of a future dominated by the possibilities of gene alteration (here called twanking) and biological modification of existing bodies, so that an obsessive mother can transform herself into an epidermis coating an almost fullsize replica of the Statue of Liberty, fill her hollow insides with various partials of her full personality (the Nurse, the Cook, the Lover, etc), and can raise her son inside her, too. (Kelly doesn't quote, but may have had in mind, a famous Woody Allen line: "The last time I was inside a woman is when I visited the Statue of Liberty.") "Mr Boy" is about her son, whom she has periodically "stunted" so that he never reached puberty. But *Wildlife* is not about Mr Boy; it is about the mother, and it must be said that Kelly never really manages to conflate his portrait of damaged but foxy, truculent but pliant Wynne Cage and the fairy-tale monstress behind the last door behind the final partial in the dark at the top of the stairs in the Statue of anything but Liberty.

If this can be accepted and coped with, *Wildlife* then reads as something of a tour de force, splaying its protagonists (as in any fixup, point-of-view defines protagony, but can change dizzyingly from section to section) across a century or so, jumping huge gaps, moving from self-contained narrative bits (ie, the stories suffering fixup) into the usual final section which contains material whose abstraction from normal narrative procedures, and whose wind-dazed affectlessness, are an almost invariable sign of the fixup which has worked, which has brought the reader, dizzied, to some abyss. It is how Van Vogt worked when Van Vogt worked; it is how Nancy Kress's *Beggars in Spain* works (this book much resembles it at points, though the thrice-split Wynne's mainline lineage is probably traceable straight back to John Varley's *The Ophiuchi Hotline* [1977]).

"Wildlife" is intelligence which has been uploaded from human meat into "cognizors" and becomes autonomous, or is an AI intelligence gone rogue, or both, quorumed into marriages which must be described, from the point of view of us meat, as exogamous. The interesting parts of the novel follow Wynne as various versions of her self in space and time, along with a few partials, explore legal and other ramifications of this profound revolutionary transfiguration of the species – a transmigration we are already seeing the first clear signs of, and which (if we survive the next three decades) will shape our path. The least interesting parts of the novel (as opposed to any individual section) tell

the story of the incestuous relationship between Wynne and her "father," and of the highly implausible obsession which bedevils one of the Wynnes for a century or so. Kelly's strengths do not lie in control over plotting – almost everything he writes unravels a dense painterly neologism-rich mise-en-scène into desultory movements, thin outcomes. But *Wildlife*, because it is a fixup, starts half a dozen times. And ends only once. The book seems, therefore, wise to itself, and giving to us.

(John Clute)

## Flowerdust, Fairies, and Other Heavy Stuff

Paul J. McAuley

Once upon a time, at the beginning of the Renaissance of British sf, there was an extraordinary novel. It was Gwyneth Jones's *Divine Endurance* (1984), the story of an artificial little girl and her cat set in a post-Catastrophe Peninsula (roughly mapping onto Indonesia). Looking back, one can see how much of the agenda of current British sf it embodied – concern with character-driven plot, cultural diversity, the dismissal of US triumphalism that was, then, almost universal in sf, strong female characters, a streetlevel view of technological change, and little concern for leaders and winners. It did not spring forth, fully armed, from nothing – although it was her first adult sf novel, Jones was already writing for children as Anne Halam – yet at the time, and even now, it was a revelation.

Ten years later comes a kind of spin-off, *Flowerdust* (Headline, £15.99), a tale which, like one of Hawking's baby universes, is inflated from a single incident in *Divine Endurance*'s crammed pages. The angel doll, Cho, who wants nothing but to serve her chosen special human, and her cat, Divine Endurance (who has her own inscrutable agenda) are sidelined. Taking centre stage are the human rebels with whom they have become entangled, notably Derveet, the charismatic rebel leader who has become Cho's special person, and two characters who were only fleeting glimpsed in *Divine Endurance*. One is Cycler Johnny, a girl from a clan of strict women-only culture; the other is Endang, a failed stud from matriarchal Timur.

We are somewhere in the middle of the struggle to unite the different cultures of the Peninsula. There is a considerable amount of back story, elegantly but somewhat obliquely

reminding us of where we are, and why, and further elucidating the tangled politics (often indistinguishable from sexual politics) and history of the various cultures of the Peninsula. These are rubbing along together uncomfortably under the rule of the Koperasi, the occupying army of the shadowy technocratic Rulers, but revolution is coming. A powerful drug, flowerdust, is causing trouble in the refugee camps, threatening to precipitate revolution too soon. The matriarchal family which owns Endang is supplying the flowerdust, and wants to get hold of more. Derveet remembers (rather conveniently) that when she was a farmer, long before she became a rebel, she harvested a batch of flowerdust (an especially potent but rarely occurring season's growth of achur, the mild drug of choice for much of the Peninsula). She sets out with Cycler Johnny, Endang, and the doll, Cho, to track down the rest of the flowerdust before Endang's family can spread it further, and in the process they discover a vile, secret plot by the Rulers.

The plot is a setup, but it doesn't matter; nor does it matter that it moves only in fits and starts before a final glad rush when all the pieces suddenly fall into place around the characters' heads. *Flowerdust* rewards the patient reader with a rich accumulation of strategically placed detail, the deepening of the theme of male/female opposition, further glimpses of the biological engineering which underlies the strangeness of the Peninsula (we find out at last, for instance, why there are no mosquitoes). There is even, shining through the gleeful depiction of the panics and sheer uncomfortableness of the characters' adventures (like a Rough Guide backpacking trip of your worst nightmares), a note of optimism at the ending which recasts the book that gave birth to this sly and engulfing story within a story.

Sometime in the late '80s, at some Mexicon or other, John Clute woke up towards the end of a panel and delivered an evangelical sermon on the generation of that feeling for which we used to read sf, the Sense of Wonder. It was (he said) all to do with abrupt shifts in scale – which prompted me to testify from the audience that if he was right, then James Blish's "Surface Tension," with its abrupt doubling of scale (when the microscopic human colonists, leaving their puddle in a wooden spaceship, are awed by the infinite plain which stretches in front of them, while the stars, unregarded, hang overhead) was an exemplary example of his thesis. I can't remember if Stephen Baxter was in the audience, but if not he has come to the same conclusion.

Baxter should need no introduction

here, being one of those British sf writers who, like so many magic beans, have sprouted in the fertile pages of Interzone. Many of his stories fit into a sequence in which the Universe has been re-engineered by the all-powerful and inscrutable Xeelee, and humans must struggle to make their own destiny within it. *Flux* (HarperCollins, £15.99) is his fourth novel, and the second in the Xeelee sequence.

It is traditional, uncompromising Hard SF, set in an environment where Baxter's intimate knowledge of the weirder and wilder shores of physics can shine especially bright: the metre-thick envelope of superfluid neutrons investing the surface of a neutron star. This is not the first novel about life on a neutron star, but Baxter brings a plethora of new and vivid ideas to the premise. Not least is that he populates it not with two dimensional aliens but modified, microscopic humans who swim in the superfluid "air," their metabolism based on tiny nuclei and superfluid neutrons.

Because of their heretical belief in the prerogative of the Xeelee to shape the Universe as they see fit, a tribe of humans have been expelled from the spindle city which hangs at one of the star's poles. Their precarious living, hunting air pigs and harvesting proton-rich leaves in the forests which hang at the superfluid boundary, is disrupted by storms in the magnetic flux lines that girdle the star. Three of them – a young woman, a younger boy, and an old man – seek refuge in the spindle city, where their store of lore about the Xeelee becomes essential knowledge, for it is the Xeelee who are disrupting the flux lines, and will, if not stopped, destroy the star itself.

The young woman, Dura, embarks with one of the leaders of the city on a journey in a wooden spaceship, passing through a wormhole, that ever-popular means of getting instantly to the heart of the matter. Dura encounters one of the urhumans who made her race, now a stored personality in a virtual reality environment encoded in the neutron star's core. The history of human habitation of the star is parsed for meaning; as with most hard-sf novels, a single decision must be made.

Baxter obviously had a lot of fun with his rich and intricate extrapolations of how an ecology and a civilization based on subatomic interactions might exist: his delight burns on every page, and his sustained inventiveness, particularly of the detailed functioning of the spindle city, carry the book. Like most hard sf, characterization is no more than efficient: what is important is not what characters are, but what they know, and here knowledge is won lightly. Characters have an unnerving ability to swiftly and accurately assess their situation, and

unravel a history not muddled by myth. They explain to themselves that they can understand the ultrahard physics that governs their world because their ancestors were brighter than average, but really they understand it because the author allows them to understand it.

The plot may move with suspicious smoothness, and its resolution may appear to beg a sequel (the Xeelee appear and disappear like the Gods of the Machine that they truly are), but Baxter's evocation of this wonderfully strange world is masterful, and there is one genuine moment where he fully engages the reader's sense of wonder. This does not occur in the sequences which are overt homages either to Blish's "Surface Tension" – the wooden spaceship, biologically powered and crewed by microscopic pan-tropically-engineered humans – or to the hotel room where God runs the room service of Clarke's 2001. Instead, it springs clean and true from Baxter's own imagination. We are shown a vast, densely populated vertical city, and the characters viewing it with awe lend us the realization that it is all of a centimetre tall. It is a thrilling moment in a novel laced and bound tight with vibrant exposition, an intricate puzzle worked out to the last full stop.

Like all good novels, Michael Swanwick's *The Iron Dragon's Daughter* (Millennium, £14.99) has at its heart a simple yet original idea. It is this: far from remaining an enclave of recidivist medievalism, fairyland has kept pace with human civilization. It is a dark distorting mirror of our worst urban nightmares, where the opposed metaphors of fantasy and technology feed off each other.

Jane, a human changeling, is enslaved in a fairyland factory which manufactures iron dragons, the magical equivalent of stealth bombers. She escapes with the collusion of a disaffected dragon, and is ensnared in its plot to mount an assault on the gate at the heart of fairyland. That's the plot: this is a fantasy in which the quest is internalized.

Jane's humanity gives her a degree of power, but she is not immune to magic. She is compelled by the glamour of the school bell to receive an education and, while indulging in petty thievery, begins to learn the ways of the world, the guiles of its marvelously grotesque population of feys and weirds. She manages to fool the authorities into granting her a scholarship to University. She studies alchemy, but more importantly she learns the small hard lessons of adolescence, the uses of sex and drugs, and learns of a way to get home, a way through the knot at the centre of things. When the dragon finally makes its assault, she is a willing accomplice.

It is a twisty, cunning tale, so ingeniously put together that it immediately demands re-reading. Swanwick, whose previous novel, *Stations of the Tide*, won the Nebula last year, is an inventive, subversive writer, and *The Iron Dragon's Daughter* irradiates the tropes of fantasy with science-fictional extrapolation, flinging off ideas that would sustain the careers of lesser writers.

His fairyland is no easy place to live; nor are the lessons that Jane earns in her rite-of-passage simple or transparent. As is traditional, time runs strangely in fairyland. Jane's quest follows the arc of experience of American teenagers of the last third of the 20th century, 30 years here compressed into the span of the same number of days. From the '50s and high school, she moves to the '60s and university. Just as that generation was winnowed by the Vietnam war, so Jane's fellow students, who share her experiments in sex and drugs, are winnowed by a day-long Teind or tithe, and those lost dwindle to a list of names publicly mourned. Finally, just before the dragon reclaims her, Jane falls amongst yuppie elves, enduring, amongst other unspeakable horrors, a club where a troll spouts the newspeak babble of George Bush.

The hard lesson learned, here as then, is that there is no riddle to be answered at the heart of the world: against all questions, the Goddess is silent – or her answer, freeing Jane, is equivocal, understood only by living it, and dying in it. Most fantasy consists of doodling on a map already scribbled over and creased with use, or making pristine plastic replicas in which Babes and hunky Princes painlessly disport. Swanwick puts the map in the mirror, and it is ourselves, our own dark reflections, that gaze back at us.

Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* (Penguin/Roc, £8.99) is an exuberantly funny cyberpunk satire set in an ultracapitalistic, balkanized USA. Hiro Protagonist is an impoverished hacker who helped set up the parameters of the virtual reality Metaverse, a sustained and detailed metaphorical riff which brings logic, geography and a stunning vision of what cyberspace should be. Hiro's mundane job is that of pizza delivery man for the Mafia, but in the metaverse he is a Magic Kid. Together with Y.T., a radical skateboarding courier – sorry, Kourier – barely out of her teens, he is caught up in a mystery revolving around the Snow Crash virus, which blows the minds of people plugged into the Metaverse.

The action, and there's a lot of noisy action, is powered by a conspiracy involving a Secret History of the last 4000 years, the Tower of Babel, a cult

predating the Babylonians, and much else. It's the Mother of all Conspiracy Theories, outdoing even Pynchon and far too complicated to explain here (and in any case it unravels faster than Mr Stephenson can cut away loose ends and gordian knots), except to mention that the central idea is that civilization is a virus from outer space, and a cult is attempting to reprogramme humanity for its own ends. More than the plot, it's the style of the thing that counts. It is knowing and acerbic, a dazzling hyperkinetic dance down the dark mean streets of cyberspace and back up again into the sunlight.

Orson Scott Card's *The Ships of Earth* (Tor, \$22.95) is the third volume of the Homecoming series, and continues the story of those chosen by the Oversoul, the very big and very old computer that rules the colony planet Harmony. The all-knowing Oversoul (like The Phantom, the Oversoul can see into the hearts and minds of men) has preserved a peaceful civilization on Harmony since it was settled 40 million years ago, but only by maintaining a ban on most technology. Now the Oversoul is assembling an expedition to Earth, whose Keeper appears to need help. The Chosen are the end product of a subtle breeding programme. They are quite literally the Children of God, can all communicate directly with the Oversoul to some degree or other, and all have troubling dreams, apparently sent by Earth's Keeper, which have yet to be understood.

Chief among the Chosen are Nafai and his wife, and *The Ships of Earth* describes how Nafai becomes the leader of his father and his brothers, and assumes the mantle of Starship Captain. Card is second to none at delineating the tensions within a close-knit group, and here he makes some telling points about the nature of male and female attitudes to society, although his contrasts between his little desert tribe and the baboons living close by are perhaps unsubtle. But in the end, all are subservient to the needs of the Oversoul, which is to say the needs of the author. Card's thumbprint is to be found on every page, not least when the lone homosexual character sees the error of his perverted ways and fathers a child, and when Nafai undergoes the ritual mutilation that all Card's heroes must suffer when they gain power (which is to say, some measure of the author's power to affect the plot). Everyone here speaks in the same voice, and it is the voice of Orson Scott Card. The series marches on, and every character marches in perfect step.

From Fred Pohl comes what is ostensibly another Mars novel. But *Mining the Oort* (HarperCollins,

£4.99) gets away from a barely realized Mars as quickly as it possibly can, and turns into a mix of space-cadet rite-of-passage and locked space station murder mystery, seasoned with alternating expository chapters we can forgive because they are in Pohl's exemplary wry style.

Dekker DeWoe, born in the hard scrabble poverty of Mars, trains for a prestigious job in the Oort, where comets are aimed at Mars as part of a terra-forming programme that is threatened by cutbacks. Seasick with the usual culture-shocks when he goes to Mother Earth, DeWoe is an innocent in the midst of an intrigue that Pohl makes visible by casual sleight-of-hand only towards the end. It's a cautionary tale that shackles itself with its own caution. Despite some telling points about the costs and resentments of colonialism, *Mining the Oort* says nothing much that's new, although it delivers what it has to say with unruffled poise. Even when he's coasting, Pohl puts in a professional performance.

(Paul J. McAuley)

## Acting Up Wendy Bradley

Method actors sometimes make the mistake of thinking that getting under the skin of the character they are playing is the important thing, that if they can think like Hamlet they will look like Hamlet, forgetting that their audience just sees what they do, not what they believe. So a writer needs to create a reality which feels real, which makes psychological sense, and we as readers will then forgive them any amount of hats and clocks from our Romans, any amount of detail, if the big picture is clear.

Marion Zimmer Bradley achieved this effect for me so well in *The Mists of Avalon* that it was with some trepidation that I turned to *The Forest House* (Michael Joseph, £9.99) in which she returns to the same setting, a little earlier and in another part of the forest. This time, in spite of another use of that improbable Shakespearean plot-device of one of those pairs of identical relatives no one can tell apart, the overall sense of reality does not disappoint. In Roman Britain the son of a Roman official by his dead British wife himself falls in love with the daughter of a Roman-hating druid with collaborator complications. The lovers' story is entwined with the setting up of the goddess-worshipping centre at Avalon, familiar from the earlier novel, and with the women's exploration of their powers and responsibilities in contrast to the hypocrisy of their menfolk and their manipulation

of their gods. *Mists* fans will enjoy, and *Mists* haters loathe, this, but new readers may be interested and charmed and will certainly be carried along in the sure grip of a true storyteller.

Sheila Gilluly's *The Emperor of Earth Above*, "The Third Book of the Painter" (Headline, £16.99), is also the real thing: a world which draws on the same store of myth stories and settings that everyone draws on but makes them shine fresh and new. Her hero Aengus is cast adrift in his burial ship, lost in the Hag's Embrace. Here is another use for improbable Shakespearean plotlines, for The Hag's Embrace is indeed Juliet-juice, that useful potion that gives the semblance of death. When he awakes – in a faintly Aztec setting – Aengus is naturally mistaken for his ancestor Colin the Mariner, who had promised to return again, and it takes him some time and ingenuity to put this small corner of Gilluly's world to rights before returning to his mainstream at the end of the story. This is a series which I look forward to reading again in its entirety when it is finished, to enjoy watching the pieces fit together. Gilluly does not strike me as one who is making this up as she goes, and I shall be disappointed if the whole does not amount to even more than the sum of its parts.

In *The Fires of Heaven*, Book Five of "The Wheel of Time" (Tor, \$24.95), Robert Jordan continues the saga of Rand al'Thor into a stronger and more focused volume, largely by omitting Perrin and his entourage of characters altogether and concentrating on Rand on the one hand and Nynaeve and Elayne on the other. This is turning into a really impressive piece of work which, again, makes me long for it to be over so I can read the whole thing in one long go and watch it come together. At last, too, a major character finally dies – although the death (nothing will induce me to tell you who) is signalled for miles and the aftermath is something I have been predicting for a book and a half at the least.

I am becoming slightly irritated at Jordan's continuous harping on domestic chores as the foundation of training for women characters following any kind of mystic discipline; and then even Min falls for it, with the philosophical musing that, "fall in love with a man, and you end up doing laundry." Well quite, but run away from home to become a wielder of esoteric mental powers and it seems in Jordan's world a woman still winds up doing laundry. However I forgive him, both for Birgitte, a genuine female hero, and for the Aiel vow, to follow Rand "till shade is gone, till water is gone, into the Shadow with teeth bared, screaming defiance with the last breath." I suppose the Aiel aren't actually recruiting at the moment?

**T**he heroine of Barbara Hambly's **Dog Wizard** (HarperCollins, £4.99) is so real I was almost prepared to believe she slept with her handbag by her bed and that the handbag contained:

a Swiss army knife  
a can of mace  
six boxes of matches  
a torch  
a spool of thread  
a roll of masking tape  
several granola bars  
and a luminous watch,

as we are told in the course of the novel. She is, of course, Joanna, the Los Angelina lover of the mad wizard-from-another-dimension, Antryg, and she spends some time in this novel wandering the corridors of a Tardis-style magic crystal as a not terribly effective hostage but much more assisting a dead god to restore the balance of the universe by debugging his computer programme. I have lots of time for any heroine with a heart and a brain, however odd her choice of personal essentials, and her relationship with Antryg and Antryg's with his peers ring true, however strange their setting and convenient their plot's resolution. More, and more, and more, please.

I have commented before that I am not entirely happy with the short story as a vehicle for fantasy writing since it seems to me to be a form which plays to the genre's weaknesses rather than its strengths and means that short stories often degenerate into sentiment or whimsy. However Jane Yolen's **Xanadu 2** (Tor, \$18.95) mostly avoids these twin traps (although I wouldn't, personally, have given any of the poetry house-room) and is worth reading if only for "The Hell Gamblers" by Jessica Amanda Salmonson, a piece of chinoiserie in which the protagonist is too clever to believe the evidence of his own eyes, and Will Shetterly's "Oldthings" in which the protagonist lacks the vital information which would have allowed him to interpret the appearance of the mysterious man in the red coat. There's a bit too much cat-whimsy for my taste, but then cat people seem to be able to endure heroic quantities of it so maybe Tappan King's "A Most Obedient Cat" ("You are not to bring elves into the house!") won't actually make everyone want to commit acts of random violence.

**A**nd finally Weis and Hickman. I think at last that I have found their secret. Unlike the actor-authors I have described above, those who get under the skins of their characters and imaginatively inhabit the worlds they create, Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman seem to me to be mad-scientist-authors, who do not inhabit but animate their characters and their

worlds, ripping bleeding chunks out of the shared mythologies and stapling them together with a bolt through their neck. Stand back! It's time for the lightning! For, yes, love them or hate them, it's true that, each time, the lightning strikes and the monster lurches to its feet. It lives!

This time, in **Into the Labyrinth** (Bantam, \$21.95) the "Death Gate" universe is shown up for what it is, a pantomime back-cloth rather than a stage setting, where a group of stereotypes with identifying quirks can move through their repertoire seeking applause. Alfred reveals his true name and a passing disposable character adds that he is also a part-time dragon. The villainous Xar jumps into the Labyrinth to carry off Haplo... Question: why is the Labyrinth described as an impenetrable imprisoning hell when Xar can just pop in and out like the demon king? Bah, humbug! However, the plot has started to perk up and come together and, having laboured this far, the next and final volume will, of course, be utterly essential reading. Igor, hoist it up! Up!

(Wendy Bradley)

## On a Roll

### Chris Gilmore

**T**anith Lee's **Nightshades: Thirteen Journeys Into Shadow** (Headline, £16.99) is a set of what are sometimes called "fugitive works." They tend to be collected and issued when a writer is on a roll, but hasn't anything new and to hand. The title novella, which accounts for about a third of the book, has remained unpublished since 1975, and the author's introduction has a distinct whiff of special pleading about it. Lee describes it as a study of an "operationally soulless" woman, but in fact it's far more interesting than that. Sovaz is spiritually complete, but has been brought up with little direction or design, first in the house of her scholarly widowed father, who let her do more or less what she liked; and on his death, in that of Kristian, a handsome, rich and snobbish middle-aged aesthete who marries her in the spirit of a collector who hates to let a rare and beautiful specimen go to waste.

Married, Sovaz finds herself subject to more constraints, but of a subtle kind. Kristian has little sexual interest in her, and having enjoyed her files it in a mental drawer labelled "sex with an 18-year-old virgin not closely engaged with reality," and goes on to other things. He is too self-assured to be possessive, but he requires that she continue to do him credit; her public appearances must display his taste and his wealth, and any lover she takes

must have the good looks, good manners and good health that would govern Kristian's own choice of young man (were he thus inclined). On the other hand if she pettishly destroys expensive items, this is a matter of indifference – the servants are paid to clear up the mess, and nothing is irreplaceable. Seven years of this have left her less deranged than estranged from a life of which she has never truly partaken.

Then there appears Adam, a lover who can offer her something that Kristian has never thought of – an idyll. It only lasts a day, but confronts Sovaz with a cliché of hideous banality – Adam cannot keep her in the style to which she has become accustomed. Lacking the background or stability to make a rational choice, she – but I mustn't give away the plot.

The story is a study in the impingement of romance, aestheticism and materialism, all cultivated to an extent which few could realistically adopt, and which stretches Lee's talent for the exotic well past the utmost limits of naturalistic fiction – but into symbolism rather than formal fantasy. It almost works, failing only because the ending is forced. Lee's most favoured technique is to present the utmost attractions of madness and wickedness in order to affirm the sanity of liberal human values, but here the development of her principal is abruptly curtailed so that the climax can be presented as preconceived. The writing is as effective as anyone could wish, but it seems to be about someone different. If Lee had had more confidence and experience she might have seen how the story was tending and concluded it more consistently, yet "Nightshades" is still a work of originality and panache, for all that in places the style doesn't quite match her mature achievements. The echoes of Ballard and *The Alexandrian Quartet* show that, though she had found her most characteristic mannerism of refusing to name places, she had not quite found her own best voice.

The level of the shorter pieces is even higher. Though "Paper Boat" has too little organization to sustain its burden of atmosphere and allusion there isn't a real dud in the book, which is quite remarkable. "The Mermaid" resembles Lord Dunsany at his quietest in style (though not in content) while "Il Bacio (Il Chiave)" recalls Vernon Lee. Others, especially the wonderful "Blue Vase of Ghosts," and the contrasting studies in evil, "The Devil's Rose" and "Three Days," are like no one else at all.

Many have claimed to live for their art no less than Tanith Lee, but few have demonstrated such a self-confident commitment to a unique path from so early on. Such a combination of interesting ideas and an individual

cultivated style is very rare; no one who cares for either, let alone both, should pass this book.

Dan Simmons hasn't been published so long, but he's on no less of a roll than Lee. *Lovedeath* (Headline, £8.99) lists his nine previous books, which have gathered eleven awards between them. It's a collection of four novelettes and a novella, all recent, and (as he says himself) offering a showcase of his range. They also display his most favoured trick, which is to jump about in time while the reader fills in the lacunae as best he may – fair enough, in stories which contain strong elements of reflection and regret, but capable of being overused.

In the first tale, "Entropy's Bed at Midnight," there's technically no action at all. The narrator is tearing down a toboggan run in pursuit of Caroline, his young daughter, who's in the sled in front and enjoying the ride a lot more than himself. He loves Caroline, and would far rather mollycoddle her, as he has very considerable experience, direct and indirect, of what can go wrong with what would seem to be the safest forms of transport; on the other hand, he stands to lose her affection if he denies her the thrills that young children want. As they spiral down the piste he reflects on the many ludicrous accidents that he knows about, which were all so much less funny to the participants, and on his own metaphor of life, which consists of a descending spiral towards the tip of a cone, representing the ultimate reduction of choice, potential and energy to zero. It's a highly literary conceit, and handled well, but there's a gathering ennui. Perhaps I do Simmons wrong, but I sensed a retreat from both style and content in favour of folksiness – a cultivated exploration of the humdrum concerns of mediocre people fighting for a sense of identity and continuity in a dangerous and increasingly incomprehensible world.

"Dying in Bangkok" concerns a man who has witnessed a horrifying supernatural sexual exhibition, described with great gusto and featuring a new and repellent sort of vampire, while on R&R in Bangkok in 1970. It has been fatal for at least one participant, and preys on his mind, as well it might; but instead of thanking his stars he got out in one piece and vowing never to return, he goes back many years later, prepared to pay a fortune (literally) to experience it himself. Why? Well, this is a variation on the one about the man who can poison vampires because he's dying of lukaemia, now updated for HIV. I wasn't convinced last time, and I'm still not. If a vampire's system can cope with malaria, TB and hepatitis B, it should be equal to something as fragile as HIV.

The next story, "Sleeping with Teeth Women," is much better. Simmons can claim a trace of Red Indian ancestry, so that for him *Dances with Wolves* wasn't just another piece of pious kitsch but a personal insult. This indignation informs his tale of Lame Badger, a young Sioux growing up in the mid-19th century, with genuine fire. As always when dealing with an unfamiliar setting, Simmons enriches the atmosphere with plenty of authentic-seeming background detail. I'm in no position to judge, but it reads like the fruit of careful research, and adds immeasurably to the interest of a tale which is funny, Lame Badger being highly sexed and in constant terror of the tribal elders, and tragic, those being tragic times for the Indians.

"Flashback" is another winner, having as its McGuffin a drug which allows you to relive segments from your past in real time. The effects are morally debilitating; some choose to recall childhood or teenage happiness, but find it never quite so good as it felt at the time, since the older self perceives aspects of which the younger was unaware, and has the burden of hindsight besides; some obsessively revisit the moment that really bollixed up their lives (or perhaps not, there being no end to the human capacity for self-deception); the super-cool set about building up a collection of feel-good memories to savour later – rapes and murders, principally, but for those of more subtle perceptions, betrayal adds spice. Regardless of choice, Flashback prevents you from doing anything worthwhile in the here and now. Simmons presents a somewhat jaundiced view of human nature and American society, but with stunning conviction. My only cavil is that he over-eggs the cake by tacking on an international conspiracy. It would make better artistic sense if they'd loused-up their lives by sheer, natural talent.

The novella, "The Great Lover," is more experimental, and doesn't entirely work for me. It takes the form of a diary, purportedly written by James Rooke, a poet who was a subaltern in the Battle of the Somme, and who knew Sassoon, Graves etc. There's obvious scope for conventional but effective writing about the horrors of war in general and the follies of that one in particular, which Simmons accomplishes to his usual high standards of tone and authenticity. I only spotted one slip: an English officer of that generation would not have referred to private soldiers as "enlisted men," which was then strictly US. Here the McGuffin is that Rooke is subject to fugues in which he has visions (or hallucinations) of dalliance with a superbly beautiful woman who may be Death (or perhaps Life).

It's a little reminiscent of All That Jazz, though the lady has more to say for herself, but while it's all very well done the philosophical content is thin. However well you describe the horrors of the trenches, anything you say about them that has not been said before is likely to be perverse or impertinent. Simmons also makes the serious artistic error of including fragments of genuine poems from that era and the whole of Rupert Brooke's "The Great Lover" (1914) as if by his own character. Since he's supposed to know (or know of) the actual writers, this undermines his own credibility from the outset. Moreover, the "frame" in which the diary is presented refers to the damage it may possibly do to his posthumous good name. Since he does nothing of which any rational person would be ashamed, given the hellish circumstances of the time, except once, in a fit of hysteria, to slaughter a family of cats, this leads to anticlimax.

Well, I said it was experimental, and most experiments fail. The scenes of horror and of dalliance are first class, even if the whole doesn't quite gel.

**N**othing could be less experimental than *Wanderer* by Donald E. McQuinn (Del Rey, \$10.00), an old-fashioned adventure story in the manner of Poul Anderson, recalling, with its post-débâcle setting and many strong female characters, *The Winter of the World*. It's a sequel to *Warrior* (which should ideally be read first, for all that it's not so well paced) but there are enough data-dumps in the early chapters for this to be optional. America has been reduced to iron-age technology with culture to match, but the two most important viewpoints are those of Sylah, a priestess, and Matt Conway, one of a handful of marines who had volunteered for a spell of cryogenic sleep, hoping to emerge as leaders shortly after the worst was over. Instead they find themselves five centuries on with lives to make in a world over-supplied with leaders of its own. This allows plenty of scope for embroilment and for Anderson-style nostalgia, most poignantly in the case of Marine Lieutenant, Donnacee Tate. She is black, and a warrior; and though interbreeding has diluted institutionalized bigotry away, she is triply an oddity to the patriarchal societies of what were once the West Coast States. In her loneliness she becomes fixated on Dodoy, one of the great toe-rags of literature, purely because he has the darkest skin around (that he has also saved her life is incidental; as Bruntschli remarked, a soldier gets used to hearing people lie and having his life saved).

With devious and murderous religious leaders, complex sexual tensions, conflicts of loyalty and objective and the marines' constant fear that their

true strangeness will become sufficiently known for them to be killed as witches, McQuinn has assembled all the material for a traditional rattling good adventure yarn such as Rider Haggard would have been proud to claim. It even has a typical Haggard element of mysticism: many of the contemporary characters possess a form of second sight, partially controlled through hard discipline. Boyish light entertainment? Yes; but of top weight and top rank. Nor does his writing let him down. Two lines of dialogue from when a party has entered an enemy camp under very uncertain diplomatic colours deftly encapsulate the spirit of his world.

"How long do you think we'll last?"

"Not as long as we will if they take us alive."

An encounter with a wild boar is especially well done, as is a difficult childbirth under primitive conditions. Both reek of authenticity (how can McQuinn have spent his time?), but are only two among many well-visualized incidents spread over a big book.

My only objection is that McQuinn pads the story with some rather contrived adventures on the way, especially when Tate's party is captured by the tyranny of Kos (formerly San Francisco and its hinterland). Kos combines tyranny with anarchy, to the peril of the principals' lives and the credibility of the plot in about equal measure – and delaying McQuinn's presentation of his setpiece studies in great capacities corrupted by great power. But if the wagon creaks at times, it offers a great ride; only the hyper-sophisticated will turn green.

The cover of Laurell K. Hamilton's vampire tale, **Guilty Pleasures** (NEL, £4.99) is strongly reminiscent of Anne Billson's excellent *Suckers*, nor does the resemblance end there. It also features a hard-boiled female narrator, Anita Blake, animator. This lady has no dealings with Bugs Bunny, however; she's a professional forensic raiser of the dead, and much in demand over missing wills and the like.

The basic idea is rather neat. Vampires are a conservative bunch, but they've at last cottoned-on to the great advantages that outing can confer: they're a minority, and as such can do no wrong in liberal eyes as long as they make ritual reference to their historical grievances – all those dispossessions, stakes through the heart and so forth. By the same logic, they have irresistible appeal for every masochist in America, which some exploit very effectively, and about which others get a bit uptight. Only the respectable can afford uptightness, from which it follows that when a number turn up

permanently dead, Something Must Be Done. Anita is conscripted to investigate, mainly because she has expert knowledge not only of vampires, but of zombies, were-creatures and ghouls as well.

She finds the assignment distasteful, preferring her other speciality of killing vampires who have actually left people dead (as opposed to consensually undead), but her would-be employer, who closely resembles Anne Rice's Claudia, includes in her arsenal of persuasion the threat of being simultaneously raped and eaten alive by were-rats, and/or having her mind stripped like an onion. On reflection, Anita takes the job.

The story moves rather slowly as Hamilton lets herself get sidetracked by setpiece scenes of human/vampire interaction, including an hilarious "freak party," much like a wife-swapping thrash in Milton Keynes as recorded in *The News of the World* circa 1975, though with fewer present. To relieve the tedium there's the heady promise that one or more vampires will turn up to suck some or all of those present while the rest watch. Anita, who has gone there in search of information, finds herself cast as *hors d'oeuvres*, but it's all a bit of a non-event, as the vampires stand everyone up while they hold a dead-raising party of their own in a nearby cemetery. Guess who gets roped into that?

The book's three parts over by the time Anita identifies her murderer, but the pace picks up smartly thereafter, leading to a suitably gory climax. It should make an enjoyable camp horror film – a pity Vincent Price is dead.

All in all, good kinky fun; I note the self-indulgence, but shrug indulgently – if it doesn't quite stand comparison with *Suckers*, it's a valiant try. The principal shortfall is the character of Anita; she wisecracks, antagonizes and (forcing down her gorge), slugs it out with guns, knives and on one occasion burning gasoline in exemplary fashion, but is too much the Goody Twoshoes in her spare time. Granted, if you find holy water and crucifixes are your best defence it's only logical to take Christianity a bit more seriously, but a regular churchgoing, teetotal heroine can't deploy the authentic sleazeball charm of Dora Vale. The difference between St Louis and London, I suppose, but how does a girl in her line of work manage coffee and chat in the Episcopalian church hall? In fact, the vampires' potential for verifying Holy Orders has never really been explored. If a crucifix blest by Fr Francis X. O'Leary, SJ, drives off a vampire who uses one of Canon Spacely-Trellis's as a toothpick, what price the C of E? Had the comparison not been forced on me I'd not have brought it up, but as things stand it's a bit as if Pauline Ashwell's Lizzy Lee

had been called in as a last-minute substitute. She gives it her best shot, but she ain't the star.

Finally, Hamilton shares with Robert Rankin the tooth-grinding habit of referring to as "proverbial" items about which no proverb exists. OK, we all have our blind spots, but for her US editor's information, that is what the editor, and the editor's blue pencil, are for.

**A**nd to round off, a distinct oddity. **The Trial of Dr Jekyll** by William L. Slout (Borgo Press, no price stated) is a two-act play wherein, in the closing hour of his life, Stevenson's character imagines himself arraigned before the bar of his own conscience for the evils he has done – directly to himself, indirectly to others through the activities of the abominable Hyde. It's a highly stylized piece, and must make heavy demands on the principal actor, who is required to transform from Jekyll to Hyde and back through changes of expression, stance and voice without leaving the stage. Slout says that it has been performed effectively at San Bernardino, in which case all credit to Doug Buckhout, who took that part.

Slout employs many of Stevenson's own words, and it's to his enormous credit that he's sufficiently immersed in the style for the joins not to be apparent. I can imagine it working extremely well, but anyone who feels like staging a performance will need to be careful with the text – it's very slackly edited. "Want" for "wont" I can take in my stride, but "damnedable" is – damnable. Assuming no doubling, you will need a full set of nine copies. Good luck!

(Chris Gilmore)

## Terminal This, Terminal That Mark Jones

**A**cademia can appear to the outsider as a closed system, perpetually generating self-indulgent and exclusively elitist texts. Literary criticism is often seen to be the worst offender, and the type of criticism that deals with popular genres, where a writer seeks to justify his/her juvenile interest in, for example, science fiction, by analysing it to destruction, regurgitating a dictionary, and continually summoning forth the spirits of Foucault, Baudrillard and Derrida, must be considered the most unpalatable of the devil's works.

The recent book by American film-studies lecturer Scott Bukatman initially seems to fulfil many of the most

dreaded expectations, with lengthy discussions of science-fiction texts interwoven with explications of postmodernism. Indeed, *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction* (Duke University Press, £16.95) will be heavy going for the non-specialist. What lifts Bukatman's book onto a different level from most academic works on sf, postmodern or otherwise, is the breadth of reference, self-disciplined rigour of analysis and his obvious enthusiasm for both science fiction and postmodern philosophy.

With excellent analyses of William Burroughs, Ballard, Dick, William Gibson, Sterling, Greg Bear, John Varley, Howard Chaykin, Frank Miller, Cronenberg, the Survival Research Laboratory, Max Headroom, and many more, Bukatman's book has something for everyone. Throughout the 300-plus closely printed pages Bukatman's "central thesis is...that contemporary SF is speaking from a condition of 'dispossessed privilege' and a subject-condition characterized by a failure to know 'where to put itself'." He marshals all of the eminent names listed above to support his argument that recent science fiction, in all its myriad forms, is either a symptom of, or addresses directly, the problem of human identity in an electronic and/or cyberspatial world. "Terminal" is one of several useful postmodern words, having several meanings, many connotations, and a vaguely apocalyptic undertone. Like the best cultural critics, Bukatman makes his chosen vocabulary work hard. During the book we move inexorably to the heart of darkness, through chapters on "Terminal Image," "Terminal Space," "Terminal Penetration" and "Terminal Flesh." Bukatman is on the hunt for the human in contemporary Western culture, and science fiction is simultaneously hero and villain. He claims that "the function of the genre...is to compensate for the loss of the human in the labyrinth of telematic culture by simply transforming it into an arena susceptible to human control." Science fiction's ability to plug into the cutting edge allows a measure of human interaction with advanced technology, but also gives the illusion of mastery. The groundbreaking fiction of Gibson and others is just another response to a potentially emasculating technology.

My chief criticism throughout the book was the lack of reference to an external world unmediated by postmodern or paraspacial theory. The "Postmodern Condition" has been criticized for being relevant only to Western and patriarchal society – "if only we had these problems of identity in a technologically advanced world" might be the response from a famine-stricken country. However, in the final (and shortest) chapter, "Terminal

Resistance/Cyborg Acceptance," Bukatman proposes several methodologies for resisting the self-affirming but ultimately illusory fantasy of technological symbiosis. Chief among these is feminist science fiction, which "acknowledges the pervasive interface of human and technology, but...also confronts the ambivalent and profound dilemmas created by that interface." This can also stand as a description of and endorsement for Bukatman's brilliant, although inevitably provisional, manual for modern times.

(Mark Jones)

## The Way to Wonder

### Mike Ashley

I fell in love with the wonder of Lord Dunsany many years ago when I stumbled upon his story "The Bird of the Difficult Eye." There is a long paragraph toward the end where Dunsany describes the passage of the thief Neepy Thang from London's Victoria Station, through the North Downs of Kent and into Fairyland. I have never since encountered a passage that is so evocative of the transition from our humdrum world to one of wonder and magic. Dunsany was unique. In his day he was very popular and it is a sad reflection of our times that his work is so unavailable. I do not believe that any of his fantasies are in print in Britain, and suspect that there are only a few in the United States.

It is down to the indefatigable champions of magic to keep his name alive. Darrell Schweitzer has done much valiant work in this area over the last few years, assembling a volume of Dunsany's previously uncollected works in *The Ghosts of the Heavyside Layer* (1980) and writing a critical analysis and survey of his work in *Pathways to Elfland* (1989). Now he has teamed with researcher and critic S.T. Joshi to produce the first full length listing of Dunsany's work: *Lord Dunsany: A Bibliography* by S.T. Joshi and Darrell Schweitzer (Scarecrow Press, £42.50).

It reveals much. We learn from it just how prolific Dunsany was. He published 92 books during his lifetime, over 540 stories (some still uncollected), 183 essays, over 540 poems, 47 plays and a score or more of other miscellaneous works. By far the majority of this output is fantastic in nature or evocative of worlds of wonder, making him one of the most prolific writers in the field. With this volume we can at last start to appreciate the full scale of Dunsany's output, and it enables us to complete our libraries and seek out some of the more elusive material.

Joshi and Schweitzer are the first to admit that they have probably not tracked down all of Dunsany's work, and that is quite probable considering its scale and diversity. Dunsany was larger than life in the real world, and larger than life in his writings. His professional output spanned nearly 60 years, and yet his final works are as fresh and as inspiring as his first. Here was a man whose brilliant imagination and sense of wonder stayed young and vibrant despite the trials and terrors of the real world.

One of the great values of this book is that it has traced the periodical publication of Dunsany's fiction, revealing that many stories were first published a good few years before they appeared in book form, particularly those in *The Man Who Ate the Phoenix* (1949), which could easily be seen as post-war stories when in fact many first appeared in the 1930s. This book not only indexes all of Dunsany's writings together with full reprint information, but catalogues works about Dunsany and Dunsany's works in translation. There is also a short but very informative introduction on Dunsany's career as a writer.

It is too much to suppose that this volume will revive interest in Dunsany, but it should be a cornerstone for all researchers, students and devotees of his work. We now have the guide to the path that Neepy Thang sought in the hills of Kent, "age-old and fair as wonder that leads to the Edge of the World."

(Mike Ashley)

## Badly in Need of Falstaff's Fart

### Andy Robertson

Does anyone still remember the confidence generated by *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns*? When, for six months or so, it really seemed that the Graphic Novel had grown up? People who would never normally look at a comic, let alone a 200-page b.d., read one or other and sat back amazed. Gollancz set up a line in publications that were not comics, and were not aimed at the adolescent market, and other publishers followed suit. A real window of opportunity opened, but, though we've had countless attempts to fulfil the promise since then, and adult graphic novels are still being published in some numbers, does anyone still believe? After eight years, what remains?

People still talk about the new maturity of comics. I've got an example of people talking about it in front of me now: the review slip for *David Gemmell's Legend* (Legend, £9.99),

adapted by Stan Nicholls and illustrated by Fangorn. To be fair, Gemmell's heroic fantasy is quite competently treated, but I'm afraid the whole effect is about what you'd expect on the back of a cornflakes packet. But the publicity blurb makes great play with our two ground-breaking works, and announces that graphic novels must now be considered an adult art-form, as if nothing had happened since 1986. "Maybe nothing has."

What went wrong? Two things, I think. The first is that comics, especially comics in the USA, could never shake off their obsession with the superhero. Panel art is by its nature exceptionally well suited to all sorts of fantasy, from historical romance to sf, but a malign historical accident has warped half the comics of the English-speaking world into one tiny subgenre, and no attempt to break out of it has escaped the dead hand of the market. *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns* might have been called parodic superhero comics: attempts to infiltrate some reality and see what happens. This worked stunningly well once or twice, but it has been endlessly repeated, losing impact each time.

**Witness, for instance, Marshall Law** by Pat Mills and Kevin O'Neill (Dark Horse, \$15.95). If we've had superheroes-as-ordinary-people and superheroes-as-sexually-inadequate-fascists, this one might best be described as superheroes-as-a-war-vet-criminal-underclass, whom the eponymous Marshall has to violently police. Actually, I quite liked it: it has a nice line in black humour, and I have always had a soft spot for O'Neill's weirdly stylized art. But what it really goes to show is how easily a radical idea can be tamed, circumscribed, and turned into one more convention. We need fewer superheroes.

The second problem – and this hit the UK harder than the USA – is Political Correctness, the Ben Eltonization of comicdom. This is best illustrated by the decay of *2000 AD*, still Britain's best comic and the only place where mutant ideas writhe with the real pulp fervour. The comic was gutted of its best writers and artists to support *Crisis*, an "adult" publication dedicated to the glubglub womangood, manbad, blackgood, whitebad which is the croak of Lafferty's Secret Crocodile in this age. When *Crisis* predictably bombed, the same themes were crushed into *2000 AD*, further ruining it, though for a time Judge Dredd exhibited a weird undead vigour. Incapable of understanding him as one of an aristocrat class emerging from a democracy in terminal decay, his creators rewrote him as a stereotypical fascist oppressor; but, try as they might, they never quite dared to make him an unambiguous baddy, and from time to

time this gave his character a dark depth and power quite amazing in a strip which its writers so obviously and explicitly hated.

*2000 AD* has recently been given a break from re-educating us all, and it staggers on, but the torch of political correctness has passed to publications like *Deadline*. At the moment there isn't much hope of "adult" comics in the UK reflecting the realities of contemporary life without the filters of dogma, let alone generating powerful and fruitful fantasy.

That's not to say PC is absent in USA comix, though it is not usually so pretentious or so hollow as it is in another one we have to review, *Grendel: Warchild* (Dark Horse, \$18.95). I can only describe this as, quite uniquely, combining the worst of East and West – the childish US obsession with superheroes and the childish Oriental obsession with martial-art ninja types. Add to this carefully proportioned skin colours, no sex that is not either lesbian, troilistic or inter-racial, the correct number of women in positions of power, and so on, and it becomes obvious why it won an award. The plot is a run-of-the-mill lost-heir-returns-guided-by-invincible-warrior: the art is serviceable but poor. Give it a miss.

**Up** from down under, I had heard good things about the Australian dominatrix *Tank Girl* (Dark Horse, \$14.95), but I am afraid this compilation is only a couple of grades above Redfox. Behind the feminist veneer are basically a lot of pictures of girlie(s) with big bazookas acting tough, drawn by, and drawn for a market of, boys afraid of sex. It wants to be reeely reeely hard, but it just can't get it up. Sorry.

Enough of unmixed condemnation. Though I have not seen a lot that I like recently, I can say quite good things about *Rawhead Rex* (Eclipse, £6.99). Eclipse have been running a good line of unpretentious, cheap, well-written and well-illustrated stuff. *Rawhead* is the latest, a version of Clive Barker's memorable story about a reawakened phallic monster, a sort of giant walking willy with teeth, that terrorizes a village until it is brained with a paleolithic sheela-na-gig. This sounds silly but it really works, and most of the credit must go to illustrator Les Edwards, whose *Rawhead* is an achievement: a thing of obscene, slubbering horror.

A pity that such talent should go to illustrate such a bad idea. A glance at actual paleolithic art should show that the carvers of those ancient pornographic figurines knew their cocks as roots of pleasure and new life, not as child-eating horrors. And they were right: the fear and hatred of masculinity *Rawhead* tries to dramatize is a sad modern mistake. For all that, I repeat, this one is worth getting, and for the artwork alone.

**With** the impact of Punch's prick and the resonance of Falstaff's fart, in bursts *Meng & Ecker* no. 7 (Savoy, about £2): not Ben Elton, but Chubby Brown. After sampling this I buckled and sent off for the whole series, and I think it's gorgeous. I particularly liked no. 2, where the brothers have to redeem a conference on literature at Oxford. They do this by messily decapitating Melvyn Bragg, John Fowles, Anita Brookner and Martin Amis and replacing their heads by, respectively, those of Ishmael Reed, Henry Treece, C.L. Moore, and William Hope Hodgson. Drastic, but not unreasonable. I also got *Lord Horror* numbers 1-7, a more serious, more flawed, but very interesting sequence. Though the first two are nothing to get excited about, the run of 3-7, set in a weird alternative wartime, are exquisite.

These are the only things I've seen in the last six months that I can really recommend, and if you are bored sick you could do worse than send a few tenner to SAVOY BOOKS, 279 DEANGATE, MANCHESTER. You'll get something back that you may not like, but I guarantee that it will glut you for a week or two.

(Andy Robertson)

## Books Received

### February 1994

The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the month specified above. Official publication dates, where known, are given in italics at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

**Anthony, Piers. Chaos Mode.** "Book Three in the ground-breaking Mode series." HarperCollins, ISBN 0-246-13862-9, 300pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1994; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen].) 24th March 1994.

**Baker, Will. Shadow Hunter.** Penguin/Roc, ISBN 0-14-017237-8, 536pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1993; reviewed by Paul McAuley in Interzone 75.) 24th February 1994.

**Benchley, Peter. White Shark.** Hutchinson, ISBN 0-09-178740-8, 307pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Sf/horror novel, first published in the USA [?], 1994; proof copy received; this latest undersea thriller by the author of *Jaws* involves the 50-years-after consequences of "a bizarre genetic experiment conducted by the Nazis.") 7th July 1994.

**Brite, Poppy Z. Lost Souls.** Penguin, ISBN 0-14-017392-7, 359pp, paperback, £5.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1992; the debut novel of an American writer, born 1967, who is already known for her short stories.) 24th February 1994.

**Bussing, Sabine. A Darker Shade of Bale.** Book Guild, ISBN 0-86332-895-4, 200pp, hardcover, £11.95. (Horror collection, first

edition; the author is German, and her doctoral thesis was published in 1987 as *Aliens in the Home: The Child in Horror Fiction* [Greenwood Press]; it's unclear whether these stories were first written in the German language or in English; Ramsey Campbell commends them on the back cover.) 24th February 1994.

Cadigan, Pat. **Fools**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-586-21841-6, 299pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1992; reviewed by Paul McAuley in Interzone 69.) 14th March 1994.

Carter, Angela. **American Ghosts and Old World Wonders**. Introduction by Susannah Clapp. Vintage, ISBN 0-09-913371-7, xi+146pp, paperback, £5.99. (Fantasy collection, first published in 1993; it's slim, and the introduction by Carter's literary executor is oddly perfunctory and apologetic, but it's good to have these last few stories gathered together.) 17th March 1994.

Dubeck, Leroy W., Suzanne E. Moshier and Judith E. Boss. **Fantastic Voyages: Learning Science Through Science Fiction Films**. American Institute of Physics Press, ISBN 1-56396-195-4, xiv+327pp, trade paperback, £25 [no US price shown; distributed in the UK by Oxford University Press]. (Science textbook, first edition; alas, science educators must be getting desperate: this weighty illustrated tome attempts to teach hard science through the examples of "bad science" in Hollywood movies; the authors are, respectively, a professor of physics, a professor of biology and a professor of English.) No date shown: received in February 1994.

Frost, Gregory. **The Pure Cold Light**. Penguin/Roc, ISBN 0-14-017393-5, 242pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1993.) 24th February 1994.

Gabaldon, Diana. **Cross Stitch**. Arrow/Rowan, ISBN 0-09-991170-1, 864pp, paperback, £5.99. (Timeslip romance, first published in the USA, 1991; second Arrow Printing.) 3rd March 1994.

Gabaldon, Diana. **Dragonfly in Amber**. Arrow, ISBN 0-09-929471-0, 963pp, paperback, £5.99. (Timeslip romance, first published in the USA, 1992; sequel to *Cross Stitch*.) 3rd March 1994.

Greenland, Colin. **Harm's Way**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-586-21490-9, 378pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in 1993; reviewed by Paul McAuley in Interzone 75.) 21st February 1994.

Harrison, Harry. **The Stainless Steel Rat Sings the Blues**. Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-02620-9, hardcover, \$14.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1994.) 31st March 1994.

Hartwell, David G., with Kathryn Cramer, eds. **Masterpieces of Fantasy and Wonder**. St Martin's Press, ISBN 0-312-11024-3, 656pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Fantasy anthology, first published in the USA, 1989; proof copy received; although the selection is five years old, this is described as the first trade edition [the earlier printing was for a book club]; contains reprint stories by J.G. Ballard, J.M. Barrie, L. Frank Baum, Charles Dickens, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Jack Finney, W.S. Gilbert, Ursula Le Guin, George MacDonald, William Morris, Edith Nesbit, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Mark Twain, Jack Vance and many others; an excellent fantasy sampler.) June 1994.

Hassler, Sue Strong, and Donald M. Hassler, eds. **Arthur Machen & Montgomery Evans: Letters of a Literary Friendship, 1923-1947**. Kent State University Press, ISBN 0-87338-489-X, x+195pp, hardcover, \$26. (Letter collection by a major horror/

fantasy writer and his literary admirer; first edition; it's a beautifully produced book for the price, including drawings and photographs; recommended to anyone with an interest in Machen.) 1st March 1994.

Hudson, J. Francis. **Zoheleth**. Lion, ISBN 0-7459-2887-0, 349pp, paperback, £5.99. (Biblical fantasy novel, first edition; sequel to *Rabskeh*; we were tempted to list this under "Novelizations, Spinoffs, etc" [see below], given that the Bible must have been one of the first-ever shared-world fantasy anthologies – but no, that would be irreverent.) 25th February 1994.

Hutson, Shaun. **Deadhead**. Warner, ISBN 0-7515-0133-6, 326pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first published in 1993.) 3rd March 1994.

Jones, Gwyneth. **Identifying the Object: A Collection of Short Stories**. Swan Press [PO Box 90006, Austin, TX 78709-0006, USA], no ISBN shown, 86pp, paperbound, \$3.75 [£2.50 in UK, from Cold Tonnage Books]. (Sf collection, first edition; contains four longish stories, two of which first appeared in *Interzone*: "Identifying the Object" [a title we changed to "Forward Echoes" in IZ 42] and "Blue Clay Blues"; recommended.) Late entry: November 1993 publication, received in February 1994.

Kay, Guy Gavriel. **Tigana**. Penguin/Roc, ISBN 0-14-017704-3, 688pp, paperback, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1990; third Penguin printing; reviewed by Wendy Bradley in *Interzone* 43.) 24th February 1994.

Lee, Tanith. **Darkness, I: Third in the Blood Opera Sequence**. Little, Brown, ISBN 0-316-90653-0, 408pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first edition.) 17th March 1994.

Lee, Tanith. **Personal Darkness: Second in the Blood Opera Sequence**. Warner, ISBN 0-7515-0808-X, 435pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first published in 1993; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 71.) 17th March 1994.

Le Guin, Ursula, and Brian Attebery, eds. **The Norton Book of Science Fiction: North American Science Fiction, 1960-1990**. Norton, ISBN 0-393-03546-8, 869pp, hardcover, no UK price shown. (Sf anthology, first published in the USA, 1993; Karen Joy Fowler is listed on the title page as "Consultant": a massive, would-be definitive gathering of 67 American and Canadian sf tales from the past 30 years; there is a lengthy introduction by Le Guin; three of the stories [by Michael Bishop, Michael Blumlein and Pat Murphy] were first published in *Interzone*; recommended; this is the American edition [priced at \$27.50] now released in Britain by Norton's London office.) No date shown: received in February 1994.

Lorrain, Jean. **Monsieur de Phocas**. Translated by Francis Amery. Dedalus, ISBN 1-873982-15-1, 272pp, paperback, £8.99. (Horror novel, first published in France, 1901; the blurb states: "ranks with *A Rebours* as the summation of the French Decadent Movement...Modelled on *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, it drips with evil..."; "Jean Lorrain" was a pseudonym of poet, essayist and novelist Paul Alexandre Martin Duval, 1855-1906; "Francis Amery" is a pseudonym of Brian Stabenfeld.) 15th March 1994.

Lumley, Brian. **Return of the Deep Ones and Other Mythos Tales**. Penguin/Roc, ISBN 0-14-017303-X, 387pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror collection, first edition; it contains the novels *Beneath the Moors* [1974] and "The Return of the Deep Ones" [serialized 1984] plus two shorter tales in a Lovecraftian vein.) 24th February 1994.

McAuley, Paul J. **Pasquale's Angel**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-05489-1, 286pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Alternative-world sf novel, first edition.) 31st March 1994.

McAuley, Paul J. **Red Dust**. Gollancz/VGSF, ISBN 0-575-05599-5, 315pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1993; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 70.) 31st March 1994.

Marrero, Robert. **Vintage Monster Movies**. Hale, ISBN 0-7090-5353-3, 160pp, trade paperback, £9.99. (Illustrated history of horror films from the 1920s to the 1950s; first published in the USA, 1993; it has the appearance and feel of a very old-fashioned work, in the tradition of Forrest Ackerman's *Famous Monsters of Filmland*.) 28th February 1994.

Masterton, Graham. **Night Plague**. Warner, ISBN 0-7515-0241-3, 310pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1991.) 17th February 1994.

Modestoff, L.E., Jr. **The Magic of Recluse**. Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-201-1, 501pp, paperback, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1991; reviewed by Wendy Bradley in *Interzone* 51.) 17th February 1994.

Moran, Richard. **The Empire of Ice**. Tor/Forge, ISBN 0-312-85527-3, 351pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Near-future disaster thriller about the threat of a volcanically-induced ice age; first edition; the author has previously written such novels as *Dallas Down* and *Cold Sea Rising*; Harry Harrison, Frank M. Robinson and others praise him on the cover copy.) 10th February 1994.

Oestreicher, Joy, and Richard Singer, eds. **Air Fish: An Anthology of Speculative Works**. Catseye Books [904 Old Town Court, Cupertino, CA 95014-4024, USA], ISBN 0-9631755-2-1, xv+320pp, trade paperback, \$16.95. (Sf/fantasy anthology, first edition; contains fiction and verse by Bruce Boston, Ronald Anthony Cross, Rhonda Eikamp, D.F. Lewis, David Memmott, Misha, Ursula Pflug, Bruce Holland Rogers, John Shirley, Steve Rasnic Tem, t. Winter-Damon and many others whose names are familiar mainly from small-press magazines.) Late entry: September 1993 publication, received in February 1994.

Platt, Charles. **My Love Affair with Harlan Ellison**. Platt [c/o Interactive Systems, PO Box 595, Chelsea Station, New York, NY 10113, USA], no ISBN shown, 36pp, paperbound, \$3. (Essay recounting Platt's side of his on-and-off feud with writer Harlan Ellison; first edition; there is a simultaneous limited signed edition of 25 copies; highly entertaining if you appreciate this kind of in-fighting.) February 1994.

Pratchett, Terry. **Soul Music**. "A Discworld novel." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-05504-9, 286pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received.) 19th May 1994.

Rheingold, Howard. **The Virtual Community: Finding Connection in a Computerized World**. Secker & Warburg, ISBN 0-436-41214-4, 325pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Pop-science text, by the author of "the acclaimed *Virtual Reality*"; first published in the USA [?], 1994.) 14th February 1994.

Rickman, Phil. **The Man in the Moss**. Macmillan, ISBN 0-333-59159-3, 596pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Horror novel, first edition.) 25th March 1994.

Rusch, Kristine Kathryn. **Heart Readers**. Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-151-0, 250pp, paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1993.) 3rd March 1994.

Saul, John. **Guardian**. Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-03558-5, 390pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA [?], 1993.) 31st March 1994.

Saul, John. **Shadows**. Bantam, ISBN 0-553-40714-7, 393pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1992.) 31st March 1994.

Somtow, S.P. **Riverrun**. Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-195-3, 257pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1991.) 17th February 1994.

Strieber, Whitley. **The Forbidden Zone**. New English Library, ISBN 0-450-60399-7, 309pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1993; it's dedicated to H.P. Lovecraft.) February 1994?

Suster, Gerald. **The Devil's Maze**. Penguin/Roc, ISBN 0-14-017436-2, 258pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1983.) 24th February 1994.

Trevor, Elleston. **The Sister**. "Sequel to the national bestseller *The Sibling*." Tor/Forge, ISBN 0-312-85555-9, 256pp, hardcover, \$20.95. (Horror/suspense novel, first edition; the British-born author currently lives in Arizona and has written scores of novels in many genres – ranging from children's animal fantasies to the "Quiller" series of thrillers [as "Adam Hall"] – since the 1940s.) 9th February 1994.

Wolfe, Gene. **Lake of the Long Sun**. "The Second Volume of *The Book of the Long Sun*." Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-450-59827-6, 352pp, hardcover, £16.99. (SF novel, first published in the USA, 1994; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 81.) February 1994?

Wright, T.M. **Nursery Tale**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-05508-1, 288pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1992.) 17th March 1994.

## Novelizations, Spinoffs, Sequels by Other Hands, Shared Worlds, Sharecrops

This is a list of all books received which fall into the above sub-types of sf, fantasy and horror (including non-fiction about shared worlds, etc.).

Altman, Mark A. **Captains' Logs Supplemental**. "The Next Generation 6th Season Guidebook." Boxtree, ISBN 1-85283-399-8, 128pp, trade paperback, £9.99. (Handbook to the sf TV series *Star Trek: The Next Generation*; first published in the USA, 1993.) 10th February 1994.

Costello, Matthew J. **SeaQuest DSV: Fire Below**. Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-173-1, 264pp, hardcover, £14.99. (SF TV series novelization, first published in the USA [?], 1994; based on the TV series "created by" Rockne S. O'Bannon.) 3rd March 1994.

Douglas, Carole Nelson. **Irene's Last Waltz**. Tor/Forge, ISBN 0-312-85224-X, 480pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Secondary-character series sequel by another hand, first edition; this is an item of "Holmesiana," or Conan Doyle spinoff fiction, by an author who happens to have written a good deal of fantasy; follow-up to *Good Night, Mr Holmes*, *Good Morning, Irene* and *Irene at Large* in the "Irene Adler Mysteries" series.) 12th February 1994.

Haldeman, Jack C., II. **Perry's Planet**. "Star Trek Adventures, 4." Titan, ISBN 1-85286-509-1, 132pp, paperback, £4.50. (SF television-and-film-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1980.) 24th March 1994.

Pringle, David, ed. **Ignorant Armies**. "Warhammer." Boxtree, ISBN 1-85283-373-4, xii+220pp, paperback, £3.99. (Shared-universe role-playing-game-inspired fantasy

anthology, first published in 1989; contains stories by Steve Baxter, "Brian Craig," Nicola Griffith, William King, "Jack Yeovil" and others; this printing differs from the Games Workshop first edition by the addition of a five-page timeline and three pages of maps.) 3rd March 1994.

Roberts, Gareth. **Tragedy Day**. "The New Doctor Who Adventures." Virgin/Doctor Who, ISBN 0-426-20410-7, 290pp, paperback, £4.99. (SF television-series spinoff novel, first edition.) 17th March 1994.

Robitaille, Julie. **Quantum Leap: The Beginning**. Boxtree, ISBN 1-85283-392-0, 191pp, paperback, £3.99. (SF television-series novelization, first published in the USA, 1990; it's "based on the series... created by Donald P. Bellisario.") 10th February 1994.

Robitaille, Julie. **Quantum Leap: The Ghost and the Gumshoe**. Boxtree, ISBN 1-85283-397-1, 192pp, paperback, £3.99. (SF television-series novelization, first published in the USA, 1990.) 10th February 1994.

Stammers, Mark, and Stephen James Walker, eds. **Doctor Who Decalog: Ten**

**Stories, Seven Doctors, One Enigma**. Virgin/Doctor Who, ISBN 0-426-20411-5, 335pp, paperback, £4.99. (SF television-series spinoff anthology, first edition; contains a linked series of original stories by Paul Cornell, David J. Howe, Andy Lane, Marc Platt and others.) 17th March 1994.

## Audiobooks Received

Crichton, Michael. **Jurassic Park**. Read by John Heard. Random House, ISBN 1-85686-221-6, two cassettes, £4.99. (SF novel, first published in the USA, 1990; an abridgement of Crichton's full text.) Late entry: 1993 release, received by us in February 1994.

King, Stephen. **Dolores Claiborne**. Read by Frances Sternhagen. Isis, ISBN 1-85695-725-X, six cassettes, £19.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1992; this one is described as "complete and unabridged.") Late entry: September 1993 (?) release, received by us in February 1994.

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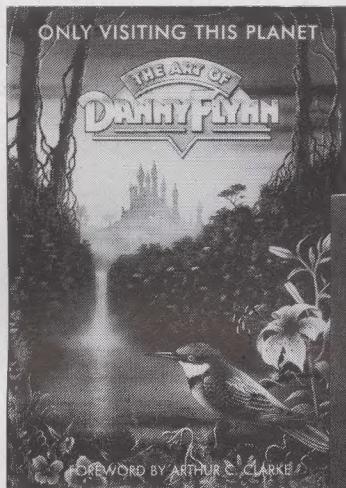
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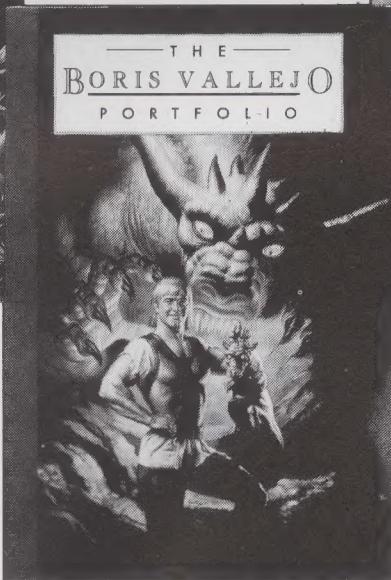
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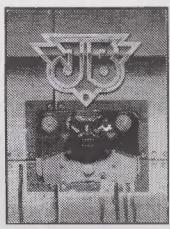
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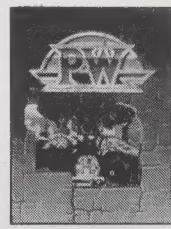
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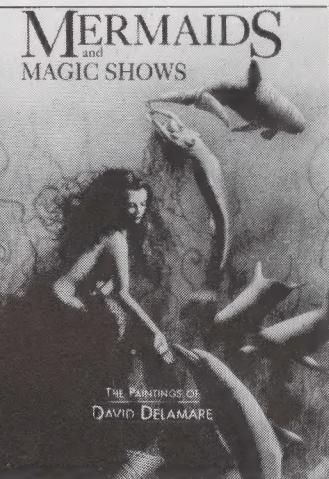
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